“THE BRILLIANT, THE DOOMED, THE ADORED ELIZABETH BARRETT”: VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MODERNIST REVISION OF VICTORIAN LIVES IN “AURORA LEIGH” AND *FLUSH*

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that "Aurora Leigh" (1932) and *Flush: A Biography* (1933), written by modernist author Virginia Woolf, are innovative biographical representations of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I relate these works to Woolf's relationship with her Victorian heritage and argue that her exploration of Barrett Browning's biography constitutes a feminist recovery project. My study investigates Woolf's modernist reconfiguration of a female Victorian poet by addressing the cultural and historical amnesia surrounding Barrett Browning in the twentieth century. By assessing Woolf's response toward Victorian culture and the subsequent impact on Barrett Browning's portrayal in her work, I contribute to an emerging area of scholarship regarding the interrelation of Victorian and modernist literature. Although many modernists participated in a literary movement that was profoundly separate from their Victorian predecessors, I argue that Woolf explored the continuity between these eras through "Aurora Leigh" and *Flush.* I investigate the relationship between Barrett Browning's early feminism and Woolf's views on female authorship, especially as these areas relate to the woman artist in "Aurora Leigh." Although many scholars remain convinced that Woolf creates canine subjectivity in *Flush,* I argue that Flush is an anthropomorphic representation of the trapped Victorian poet. By comparing the 1931 draft of *Flush* to the published version, I determine that Woolf initially intended to write a feminist biography of Barrett Browning, but later shifted to an autobiografictional mode after the passing of Lytton Strachey. Woolf blends biography, autobiography, and fiction in *Flush*, and I argue that this method deconstructs the biographical genre by including her own authorial voice alongside the voice of a neglected historical woman. Despite her revitalization of Barrett Browning's biography, Woolf is limited by her Victorian past. While she does reclaim the poet for her modernist audience, "Aurora Leigh" and *Flush* reveal the need for a much larger, more detailed recovery of Barrett Browning's life and works.

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DEDICATION

For Nicholas

my “quiet world of white and gold”

– “Insider,” Stevie Nicks/Tom Petty

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INTRODUCTION

In her 1925 essay "How it Strikes a Contemporary," Virginia Woolf ruminates on the divide between the modernists and the Victorians, observing that "no age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it" (237). As a member of the notoriously anti-Victorian Bloomsbury group, Woolf participated in this concerted effort to separate herself from the past in order to conceive a defiant modernity. In the process of resisting Victorian culture, Woolf and her Bloomsbury contemporaries complicated perceptions of the nineteenth century, fueling stereotypes that viewed Victorian life as overtly conventional and restrictive of individual freedoms. However, as Simon Joyce posits, this one-dimensional approach to the Victorians ironically "assert[s] and denigrat[es] a monolithic 'Bloomsbury' outlook, one that flies in the face of the Group's own repeated denials of a collective viewpoint" ("On or about" 632). Thus, while Woolf certainly rebels against her Victorian predecessors by participating in this defiant modernity, she also views her Victorian heritage as a valuable specimen, writing in "A Sketch of the Past" that her childhood home was a "model of Victorian society. If I had the power to lift out of the past a single day …it would give a section of upper middle-class Victorian life, like one of those sections with glass covers in which ants and bees are shown going about their tasks" (147). By referencing this cross-section of her Victorian past in her modernist present, Woolf emphasizes the importance of her nineteenth-century heritage. The presence of this Victorian-modern synergy in Woolf's work exemplifies the need for scholars to study her writing beyond the crux of modernity.

Victorian-modern studies acknowledges the continuity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by deconstructing aesthetic and temporal boundaries and rejecting the rigidity of literary periodization. Although the interrelation of Victorian and modernist

literature constitutes an emerging area of scholarship, studies on the continuity between the two eras rarely include Woolf in their scope. Scholars such as Laura Marcus (*Late Victorian Into Modern*, 2016), Kristin M. Mahoney (*Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, 2015), and Simon Joyce (*The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror,* 2007) have begun contesting the deeply entrenched opposition between the modernists and their Victorian predecessors, but their studies only briefly discuss Woolf. Jessica Feldman (*Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Human Experience,* 2002), Kristen Bluemel (*Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain*) and Elizabeth Outka ("The Transitory Space of *Night and Day,*" 2016) also address the continuity between the Victorian and modern, creating ways to describe the cohesion between the eras. Feldman suggests that the "Victorian period and the Modernist period, each so complex as to resist intellectual containment almost successfully, may be studied fruitfully as one continuous period, Victorian Modernism" (3), while Outka posits that Woolf's novels introduce a "Vicmod" mode that evokes nostalgia for the past to understand an ever-changing present. Similarly, Bluemel introduces "intermodernism" as a concept that "anticipates, resists, and depends on [the] inevitable process of comparison" (2) by "insert[ing] itself between modernism and its many structural oppositions" (3). These inventive terms delineate the rhetorical complexities of the Victorian-modern divide by dismantling the arbitrary borders between eras. Janis T. Paul (*The Victorian Heritage of Virginia Woolf,* 1987) and Steve Ellis (*Virginia Woolf and the Victorians,* 2007) examine the Victorian-modern connection through Woolf, but neither writer examines her Victorian ancestry from a feminist standpoint nor discusses her writings on female Victorian authors. While Paul suggests that Woolf's writing reaffirms Victorian values as "the only points of survival and unity in a fragmenting world" (6) and Ellis constructs Woolf as a distinctly "post-Victorian" (1) writer in *Night and Day, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse,* and *The Years,* both works neglect to discuss *Flush* or

"Aurora Leigh" as part of a feminist reconciliation with her Victorian past.

While all of these studies are important in understanding Victorian-modern continuity, Simon Joyce introduces the emblem of a rearview mirror to characterize the Victorian-modern relationship in *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, writing that "we never really encounter 'the Victorians' themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us… [and] the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image" (4). Rather than rejecting the Victorians for their outdated worldviews, Woolf continuously peers into her rearview mirror to inform her movement forward, ultimately suggesting that Victorian beliefs are an imperative element of modernist thinking. As S.P. Rosenbaum explains, envisioning the relationship between the Victorians and the moderns as symbiotic not only reveals the kinship between the eras, but also suggests that the Bloomsbury group oversimplified an otherwise complex heritage: "Bloomsbury was born and bred Victorian," he writes, and "the rational and visionary significance of the group's writing has its origins in Victorian family, school, and university experience" (qtd. in Joyce 17). Indeed, Woolf engages in a constructive dialogue with her past by assessing female Victorian authors through the lens of modernity. While Woolf engaged with numerous female Victorian writers in her essays, reviews, and novels, her work on Elizabeth Barrett Browning in particular reveals her interest in locating the roots of modernism in the nineteenth century, and furthermore, in establishing a lineage of female authorship by forging connections with her Victorian foremothers.

While most of her oeuvre was praised during her lifetime, Barrett Browning's 1856 novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* established her reputation as Victorian England's first major female poet, and this work prompted Woolf's first venture into Barrett Browning's fictional worlds. Composed of nine books written in blank verse, *Aurora Leigh* confronts the class

politics of Victorian society alongside Aurora's spiritual journey as an artist. Combining the social criticism of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* with the feminist autobiography of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre, Aurora Leigh* brazenly tackles poverty, prostitution, gender, and marriage in Victorian society, and this willingness to address controversial topics quickly secured Barrett Browning's position as one of the most avant-garde poets of the nineteenth-century. As Margaret Reynolds explains, by the end of the Victorian era, the poem had been reprinted more than twenty times in Britain and the United States and "became one of the books everyone knew and read. Oscar Wilde loved it, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote a gushing preface for it, the novelist Rudyard Kipling borrowed the plot" (vii-viii). Barrett Browning was deeply admired by John Ruskin, who described *Aurora Leigh* as "the greatest poem which the century has produced in any language" (232), by Edgar Allan Poe, who dedicated *The Raven and Other Poems* to her in 1845 "with the most enthusiastic admiration and with the most sincere esteem" (33), and by Emily Dickinson, who hung a framed portrait of "that Foreign lady" (3) in her bedroom. While her poetry was lauded by both general readers and literary celebrities alike, the details of Barrett Browning's biography remained private. In a letter to Richard Hengist Horne, a fellow poet and friend, Barrett Browning addressed the disparity between her life and works, writing that "the public do not care for me enough to care at all for my biography. If you say anything of me…it must be as a writer of rhymes, and not as the heroine of a biography" (353). Ironically, with the advent of the twentieth-century, Barrett Browning became lesser known for her poetical works and more widely recognized for her romantic entanglements, while *Aurora Leigh* began a nearly century-long fade into obscurity.

Responses to Barrett Browning's works began to change around the turn of the century, where *Aurora Leigh* was condemned for its archaic form and Victorian morality. While there are numerous examples of this negative critical reception, Irene Cooper Willis

provided a characteristically harsh review in 1928, writing that *Aurora Leigh* confirms Barrett Browning's status as "a true mid-Victorian" (13) who was "inspired by piety as well as ruled by it" (80) and describes *Aurora Leigh* as an "absurd" representation of "English social life" (92-3).[1] Although *Aurora Leigh* had been Barrett Browning's most recognized work, a shift in conversations surrounding her poetry occurred, and *Sonnets from the Portuguese* became her best-known work. Marjorie Stone explains this transformation, illuminating that "the displacement of *Aurora Leigh* by *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was further reinforced by the publication of the…courtship correspondence in 1899" (19). As numerous editions of *Sonnets* appeared in various languages and Sonnet 43, with its famous opening line "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," became one of the most recognized love poems in the English language, *Aurora Leigh* and the rest of Barrett Browning's oeuvre grew increasingly overlooked. Instead of celebrating Barrett Browning's provocative depictions of womanhood, education, and artistry in *Aurora Leigh*, readers became enthralled with the amorous exchanges between Barrett Browning and her husband, Robert Browning, and the sonnets that arose from their courtship. When the courtship correspondence was published in 1899, audiences were afforded an intimate glimpse of her life, and as Daniel Karlin observes, the publication of these letters "gave a decisive imprimatur to the legend of heroic love which had been gathering in gossip and anecdote for fifty years: it composed the two poets into their eternal attitudes of chivalry and romance" (2). After the publication of the correspondence, discussions of Barrett Browning shifted from her poetry to her submissive role in her relationships with Robert Browning and her

[1] Other unfavorable responses to EBB from the beginning of the twentieth century come from Harriet Waters Preston, the editor of a 1900 Cambridge edition of EBB's works, who dismisses EBB's work as "socialistic" (536); Amy Lowell in the poem "The Sisters" (1925), who describes her work as "fertilized" (24) by Robert Browning's love; Hugh Walker, who included the poet in *The Literature of the Victorian Era* (1910), but relegated her work to a small subsection called "The Minor Poets: Earlier Period"; and G.K. Chesterton (*The Victorian Age in Literature,* 1913), who discusses EBB in his criticism of "Great Victorian Poets," but does not mention any of her major works and focuses instead on her "much greater husband" (498). Marjorie Stone traces much of the criticism mentioned here in "Criticism on *Aurora Leigh:* An Overview" (2010).

father. Thirty years after the publication of the correspondence, Rudolf Besier's play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* depicted Barrett Browning as docile and obedient to her father and husband, and this distorted representation of her life motivated Woolf to recover the poet's life narrative.

While Woolf was initially enthralled with the Brownings' courtship as she "lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters" (5: 162) in 1933, she was one of the first twentieth-century writers to view Barrett Browning as more than a romanticized invalid or the wife of a famous poet. In an era in which *Sonnets from the Portuguese* occupied the fore of critical attention, Woolf asserted that *Aurora Leigh* "still commands our interest and inspires our respect" (212) and that "the best compliment that we can pay *Aurora Leigh* is that…it has left no successors" (213). Among the unfavorable reviews of Barrett Browning's work in the first half of the twentieth-century, Woolf's argument for *Aurora Leigh*'s modernity and her advocacy for Barrett Browning's historical recovery is anomalous. Instead of disregarding the work of her Victorian forerunners, Woolf breathes new life into Barrett Browning's history by suggesting that her oeuvre is worthy of a modernist revival. Woolf celebrates that Barrett Browning tried to "give us a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time" (212) while also recognizing that "her brilliant descriptive powers, her shrewd and caustic humour" (213) shaped the trajectory of twentieth-century literature. By adopting a feminist approach to Woolf's biographical fiction and criticism, this thesis examines Woolf's 1932 essay "Aurora Leigh" and her 1933 novel *Flush: A Biography,* locating them within the context of Barrett Browning's reception in the twentieth century and Woolf's mission to write forgotten women's lives.

Chapter One focuses on "Aurora Leigh," which appeared in *The Second Common Reader* (1932). This chapter suggests that Woolf's study of Barrett Browning constitutes a

feminist recovery project that later informed her experimentation with modernist biography in *Flush.* An essay in the first volume of *The Common Reader* (1925), titled "Lives of the Obscure," informs the methodology for this chapter, as Woolf attempts to rescue the female poet from an undeserved fate of obscurity. As with all of the writers in her *Common Reader* series, Woolf reads *Aurora Leigh* by occupying the position of Samuel Johnson's "common reader." This chapter investigates Woolf's choice to write a feminist essay from this ostensibly neutral position. The essay claims that "the only place in the mansion of literature" afforded to Barrett Browning is "downstairs in the servants' quarters" (203), and this statement forms the core of Chapter One's analysis. By investigating Woolf's use of the servants' quarters metaphor, this chapter analyzes the role of domestic spaces in "Aurora Leigh" and connects these feminine spaces to Woolf's matrilineal conceptualization of literary history. Similar to Woolf's pursuit of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own,* the "Aurora Leigh" essay continues her search for a female literary tradition by recovering an important member of this matrilineage. While the "Aurora Leigh" essay initially places Barrett Browning in the servants' quarters of the literary mansion, Woolf makes a compelling argument for the poet's emerging modernity in *Aurora Leigh.*

Whereas the "Aurora Leigh" essay addresses Barrett Browning's literary reputation through a single work, *Flush: A Biography* chronicles the poet's life narrative alongside the life of her dog, Flush. While the 1933 version of *Flush* is recognized for its experimental narrative style and canine-centric perspective, the 1931 draft of the novel adopts a different approach to Barrett Browning's biography. In this initial draft, Woolf focuses on Barrett Browning's observations and portrays Flush as merely her canine companion. Chapter Two compares the 1931 draft of *Flush* with the published 1933 version and highlights significant revisions in tone, plot, and character depictions between both versions. Through the intertextual infusion of verbatim quotations from Barrett Browning's poetry, letters, and

diary, Woolf challenges her authoritative position as biographer by allowing Barrett Browning to speak for herself, and in effect, respond to previous interpretations of her life. By affirming a woman writer's own voice, Woolf interrogates the misogynist biographical tradition. Woolf also undertook extensive research to uncover Barrett Browning's history, and the breadth of her biographical inquiry is reflected in the meticulous reading notes on her source materials. Along with tracing the progression of Woolf's research through her reading notes, this chapter also assesses the shift between her 1931 "Authorities" section, which justifies her sources in a lengthy essay, and the 1933 version, which simply lists her research materials. Chapter Two argues that Woolf initially intended to write a feminist biography of Barrett Browning.

The death of Lytton Strachey in 1932 prompted Woolf to rethink her biographical endeavor, and between 1931 and 1933, *Flush* transitioned from a feminist biography into a modernist life writing project. Chapter Three analyzes how the published version of *Flush* synthesizes Woolf's lived experiences with Barrett Browning's past. In *Self-Impression: Life Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), Max Saunders introduces the term "autobiografiction," a literary mode that expresses how "autobiography and fiction, while posed as mutually exclusive, are in fact profoundly interdependent, and constitute throughout the last two centuries a system of modern self-representation" (21). Through the creation of an auto/biography and fiction hybrid, Woolf addresses her apprehension about future biographical depictions of herself through the dwindling of Barrett Browning's reputation. Examining Woolf and Barrett Browning's shared Victorian heritage, experiences in the sickroom, and limited education, Chapter Three considers Woolf's upbringing as a valuable source as she wrote about Barrett Browning. *Flush* manifests Woolf's challenging transition from Victorian life to Edwardian existence, indicating that revisiting the past to understand the present is a productive strategy for moving forward into

the future. Instead of representing Barrett Browning's life through a conventional biographical mode, Woolf curiously chooses to tell her story through a nonhuman animal. Although many scholars remain convinced that Woolf seeks to imagine canine subjectivity in *Flush,* Chapter Three will question this line of argument by proposing that Flush is an anthropomorphic representation of the trapped Victorian poet. While Woolf illuminates Barrett Browning's forgotten history in *Flush* and "Aurora Leigh," her recovery project, in spite of her advocacy, remains partially incomplete. While she does reclaim the poet for her modernist audience, Woolf is limited by the need to break free of her Victorian past, and her work suggests that more must be done to recover Barrett Browning's history.

By contrasting Woolf's modernist perception of Barrett Browning with her former Victorian prominence, the conclusion of my thesis advocates for a twenty-first century reassessment of Barrett Browning's life and works, along with Woolf's response to female Victorian writers. This final section questions whether Woolf is successful in not only separating Barrett Browning from her domineering father and literary husband, but also in allowing Barrett Browning to claim a space in twentieth century culture and beyond.

CHAPTER ONE:

"FATE HAS NOT BEEN KIND TO MRS BROWNING AS A WRITER": THE COMMON READER AND THE SERVANTS' QUARTERS IN WOOLF'S "AURORA LEIGH"

In the "Lives of the Obscure" in *The Common Reader: First Series,* Woolf gestures toward her lifelong project of plucking writers out of the catacombs of obscurity through her writing, vividly depicting these forgotten lives as though they are star systems floating in a darkened sky: she writes that, "gently, beautifully, like the clouds of a balmy evening, obscurity once more traverses the sky, an obscurity which is not empty but thick with the stardust of innumerable lives" (109). From Woolf's perspective, a writer's descent into obscurity presents a valuable opportunity for recovery and historiographic investigation, and this hopeful rendering of literary obscurity as a galaxy of possibility embodies the intention of Woolf's *Common Reader* essays. Both volumes of the *Common Reader* series celebrate this diffuse "stardust of innumerable lives" by singling out the obscurer, often female lives and methodically revitalizing interest in their biographies and works. Woolf's role as essayist is to bridge the gap between her reading public and the literary figures that wait in the margins for their moment of recognition; thus, Woolf cautiously leads her common reader into an "out-of-date, obsolete library" (106) where "the obscure sleep on the walls, slouching against each other as if they were too drowsy to stand upright. Their backs are flaking off; their titles often vanished. Why disturb their sleep?" (106). As a female writer, critic, and common reader, Woolf boldly ventures into the dusty libraries and neglected servants' quarters of the literary mansion, daring to disturb the slumber of the obscure by writing life into their crumbling spines, and ultimately, pulling works such as *Aurora Leigh* off the shelf and wiping off an accumulation of dust and public neglect.

Before analyzing Woolf's work on *Aurora Leigh,* it is necessary to understand the significance of the common reader as the essay narrator in both *Common Reader* volumes.

Woolf developed her literary style in tandem with Samuel Johnson's interpretation of the "common reader," and as Beth Carole Rosenberg explains, she viewed the common reader as "a metaphor for a rhetorical technique that, like dialogue, allows for flux, freedom, and the lack of stable meaning" (xxi). In *Life of Gray* (1781), a semi-biographical evaluation of the poet Thomas Gray, Samuel Johnson invokes the "common reader" figure to demonstrate the divide between the broader reading public and a scholarly audience. Instead of commending the artistic worth of Gray's oeuvre, Johnson cites a poem adored by the masses to represent Gray's only notable artistic accomplishment: he writes that "I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices …must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours" (qtd. in Woolf 1). In the prefatory "Common Reader" essay in volume one, Woolf quotes this passage because she believes that it "defines [the common reader's] qualities; it dignifies their aims; it bestows upon a pursuit which devours a great deal of time, and is yet apt to leave behind it nothing very substantial, the sanction of the great man's approval" (1). Further echoing Johnson, Woolf explains that the common reader "differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated…He reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge…he is guided by an instinct to create for himself…some kind of a whole – a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing" (1). Instead of seeing the reading public as incapable of appreciating literature, Woolf suggests that reading for pleasure is an instinctual and spontaneous practice that is valuable because of its contingency. No matter how "hasty, inaccurate, and superficial" (1) their interpretations, the common reader derives an easygoing pleasure from their reading, one that the sophisticated coteries of the literary world could never fully fathom in the throes of scholarly analysis. Woolf not only appeals to Johnson's emphasis on the didactic function of the writer, but she also advocates for a modern readership that critically responds to what they read without the critic's assistance. As Elizabeth C. Madison posits, Woolf allows the

common reader to "trespass on the hallowed grounds of criticism, to enter an author's world, to reconstruct the forces which give impetus to that world…and to communicate the findings…in as lucid and stimulating prose as possible" (73). Through an engagement with the reader, the authors and their works, past critics, and future critics who may engage with her own work, Woolf takes up Johnson's critical principle to bolster the confidence of her readership and encourage the quiet solace of private reading.

In both *Common Reader* volumes, Woolf's intention is not to minimize the value of criticism; on the contrary, she objects to the authoritative nature of professional critics and seeks, as Randi Saloman explains, to construct "a world in which the reader comes to join with other readers and to meet authors informally, where one encounters authors and characters as one meets up with acquaintances and friends" (58). As a self-proclaimed common reader in this informal community, Woolf creates a voice that speaks from the perspective of an ungendered every-person veiled in anonymity. However, this apparent lack of gender often contradicts itself through a blatant fascination with women writers and an annoyance with the male literary tradition. Despite Woolf's use of the conventional "he" as a representative for the "common reader," there is a feminist undertone to a critically acclaimed female writer occupying the position of a universal common reader. As Katerina Koutsantoni observes, Woolf simultaneously establishes a strong female voice and attempts to conceal her femaleness through the neutrality of a common reader role, while highlighting the importance of the social hierarchy in shaping one's reading experience: she notes that "the corollary to these factors is a dialogic impersonality…feminism, modernism, and conditions of critical and authorial creation, combine to form her kind of 'impersonality', revealing… her intention to give voice to personality and…to connect explicitly with the reader ("Impersonal Strategy" 157-58). This complex blend of impersonality, feminism, and modernism is best manifested in the *Common Reader*'s essays on nineteenth-century female

writers, in which Woolf frequently emphasizes the tribulations of female authorship. Woolf's willingness to contest the space between the female self and neutrality is not an indication of inconsistencies, but instead, is an expression of a modernism in which the self is fragmentary, questioning its stability, and fluctuating in response to exterior conditions. This impulsive desire to expose the author's biographical self in conjunction with the self-discovery of the reading process underlies the *Common Reader* project; as Woolf writes in "How Should One Read a Book?" the desire to read can spur from chance encounters of life in motion, "that curiosity which possesses us sometimes when in the evening we linger in front of a house where the lights are lit and the blinds not yet drawn, and each floor of the house shows us a different section of human life in being" (261). The answer to this curiousity is biography and memoir, and the function of the *Common Reader* essays is to elucidate the connection between a common readership and the fascinating lives of the authors they read.

In a letter written to Clive Bell in February of 1931, Woolf speaks to the reader's desire to see inside the private world of this illuminated house: she queries, "Do you think that all memoirs are as mendacious as this - Every fact I mean, all on one side?" (4: 294). This remark sprung from Woolf's criticism of the inaccuracies in *Men and Memories,* a memoir that detailed the life of the English painter William Rothenstein and included what Woolf describes as a "Vanessa, Stella and Virginia Stephen figure, most inaccurately, all in black…having tea in the basement, very beautiful, but shy" (4: 294). Rothenstein's exposure to the Stephen women was spurred by his acquaintance with Leslie Stephen, and the resulting vignette aptly summarizes Woolf's frustration with the impossibility of accurately producing a biographical sketch. Along with voicing disappointment toward her representation, Woolf calls her recently completed book, *The Waves,* "a failure" (4: 294) due to its mixed critical reception, remarking that the novel is "too difficult; too jerky; too inchoate altogether" (4: 294) because of its experimental nature. Significantly, Woolf's dissatisfaction with *The*

Waves would allow her burgeoning fascination with Barrett Browning to come to fruition; later, in a 1933 letter, she wrote, "I was so tired after *The Waves,* that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters" (5: 162), a reading experience that would eventually lead to the composition of *Flush: A Biography*. Ultimately, through her fragmented observations on life writing in a letter to Clive Bell, Woolf arrives at her first epistolary reference to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Although this initial recognition of the Victorian poet scarcely illuminates Woolf's preoccupation with the Victorian-modern connection, Woolf's statement articulates her resistance toward the mendacity of biographical representation: she writes, "and I am turning to Don Juan and Aurora Leigh, together with all those vile memoirs, for which as you know, I have such a gluttonous appetite" (4: 294). Only a few months later, Woolf's "gluttonous appetite" for *Aurora Leigh* would lead to the publication of an essay sharing the title of this nine-book novel in verse*,* thus signalling the beginning of Woolf's three-year immersion in the life and works of Barrett Browning. For Woolf, Barrett Browning represents the common ground between the darkened servants' quarters of her Victorian past and a proto-feminist, borderline modernist exploration of London that manifests the thesis at the heart of *A Room of One's Own*: "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (75). Through *Aurora Leigh,* Woolf breaks out from "behind the folding doors of the Hyde Park Gate drawing room" ("A Sketch of the Past" 105), leads Barrett Browning upstairs from her quiet seclusion in the servants' quarters of her imagined literary mansion, and confronts her literary mothers and grandmothers by rebelling against the traditionalism of their collective Victorian past. Furthermore, she celebrates *Aurora Leigh'*s vivid depictions of womanhood, love, and the pursuit of independence through artistry.

While Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is commonly recognized for the sentimental opening line of Sonnet 43, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (231), Woolf instead sought to recover the underappreciated works in the poet's oeuvre,

directing her attention to Barrett Browning's nine-book epic poem written in blank verse. Woolf's response to *Aurora Leigh* was first published in the June 1931 edition of *The Yale Review* with subsequent republication in the July 2nd, 1931 edition of *Times Literary Supplement*. After the essay's publication, Woolf decided to include the "Aurora Leigh" essay in *The Second Common Reader.* In a brief note to Helen McAfee from March of 1931, Woolf details the drafting process of "Aurora Leigh" and notes that "it is really a study of Aurora Leigh, which I read by chance with great interest for the first time the other day" (301). Woolf likely read the 1873 Smith, Elder, and Co. edition of *Aurora Leigh* from her father's library; however, this copy of the text was more than simply an early edition of Barrett Browning's work. In the *Catalogue of Books from the Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf,* only one poetic work by Barrett Browning is listed in the collection, and fascinatingly, this singular copy of *Aurora Leigh* was given to Woolf's half-sister Laura Makepeace Stephen in 1873 by none other than Robert Browning. Although one can only speculate about the impression that this inscription may have had upon Woolf as she studied Barrett Browning's work, there is no doubt that her own education, chiefly attained in her father's extensive library, was imbued with the gravitas of Robert Browning's oeuvre, and this lasting influence is reflected in the seven volumes of his poetry in her personal collection. The rest of Woolf's collection contained various editions of Barrett Browning's letters and a two-volume copy of the courtship correspondence; indeed, as was the case with many female Victorian poets in the early twentieth century, Woolf was at first more familiar with the mythologization of Barrett Browning's biography than the extensiveness of her oeuvre.

Although "Aurora Leigh" was Woolf's first encounter with the fictional worlds of Barrett Browning's oeuvre, Woolf's 1906 review, "Poets' Letters," contextualizes and ultimately enriches an understanding of Woolf's early biographical perceptions of the poet.

At the age of twenty-four, Woolf reviewed the book *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Her Letters,* a work by renowned critic and essayist Percy Lubbock that narrativizes Barrett Browning's collected letters. The book focuses on Barrett Browning's courtship correspondence in *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-1846*, compiled by Robert "Pen" Browning after his father's death. Reviewing Lubbock's book introduced Woolf to Barrett Browning's works and life narrative, and the 1899 edition of the letters that Lubbock uses as his primary text is the same collection that Woolf would later read in 1933. Whereas Woolf seeks to dismantle the romanticized perception of Barrett Browning's life, Lubbock is situated between sentimentality and biography: while he acknowledges her cultural obscurity by noting that her work "has lost its brightness for us: much that was hailed with rapture two generations ago is quite unfamiliar now" (1), he concludes on a saccharine note, writing that "best of all… that union of poetry and of love, of two immortal hearts on whom the double gift had been lavished, that vision of romance and beauty, still glows with the colour of life" (377). Instead of concluding the book with an empowering proclamation about Barrett Browning's influence, Lubbock celebrates the poet in tandem with her husband's accomplishments, minimizing her pioneering work as a Victorian poet by relegating her to the other half of two "immortal" hearts. Julia Novak explains Lubbock's rationale, noting that the 1899 publication of the Browning love letters resulted in Barrett Browning's transformation from a literary genius to "an ailing Victorian lady who, Rapunzel-like, was rescued from the claws of an evil sorcerer-father by a poet-knight, with whom she fled to Italy at the age of 40, had a child, and lived 'happily ever after'" (86). In the eyes of both the modernists and early writers on Victorian literature such as Lubbock, Barrett Browning's conventional style, harkening back to archaic forms such as the epic poem and Petrarchan sonnet, renders the poet unworthy of further critical attention. Despite his attempt to reveal Barrett Browning's biography through textual fragments and

summative storytelling, Lubbock perpetuates a narrative that Woolf respectfully disagrees with, and this opposition would later motivate her to revisit the poet's life.

Inspired by Lubbock's polarizing treatment of his subject, Woolf begins her review by addressing the absence of Barrett Browning in contemporary cultural memory: "if it were possible to condense into set phrases that mist of felt rather than spoken criticism which hangs round all the great names in literature," she writes, "it is tolerably certain what result we should reach in the case of Mrs Browning" (101). By penetrating this mysterious biographical "mist," Woolf not only uses her metonymic language to accentuate Barrett Browning's diminishing twentieth-century prominence, but she also indicates the effect of criticism on obscure writers themselves, remarking that "not only was [Barrett Browning] a very shrewd critic of others, but…she could be almost obstinate when her literary independence was attacked" (103). Instead of making an attack upon the poet's "literary independence," Woolf empathizes with Barrett Browning's rationale as a female writer and forges connections between writers and their readership, just as she does in *The Common Reader* series. Even at this early stage in Woolf's development as a reviewer, a select few passages in the Lubbock essay reflect Woolf's transition from a conventional journalist to a subversive and ardently feminist "common reader." Woolf notices the intimate relationship between an author's oeuvre and her experiences, thus unravelling the connection between biography and fiction, and art and life: she observes that "the pure and intense flames which we detect when we read or hear of [Barrett Browning] had been blown into all kinds of vague and diffuse gusts…But when we approach her work through…her life…the pity of it is deepened" (102). Woolf realizes that knowledge of a female author's life experiences may skew the view of her work, but nonetheless, she emphasizes the importance of situating female biography and literature alongside one another. Through her interpretation of Lubbock's work, Woolf tentatively fans the flames of Barrett Browning's dwindling

reputation and questions how the poet's "story becomes so monstrous that its real effect upon Mrs Browning's life is obscured" (102). Woolf sought to reclaim Barrett Browning's life and works, and as a prominent artist who would later be faced with her own impending biography, she was haunted by the indeterminate multiplicities of Barrett Browning's history.

Many of Woolf's *Common Reader* essays question how female Victorian authors were, as she puts it in the Lubbock review, "disposed of merely as… extravagant freak[s] of early Victorian taste" (102). By acknowledging their pioneering work and suggesting that the common reader also has the power to recover these marginalized writers, Woolf incites a modernist and distinctly feminist reappraisal of critical practice. Situating canonized male authors alongside overlooked female authors, Woolf challenges the patriarchal mechanisms that dictate literary value. As Anne Fernald observes, Woolf's *Common Reader* series "anticipates and advocates for many of the practices of reader response theory: reading for pleasure, making one's own meaning before turning to other published opinions, seeking out the obscure, the lowbrow, and the popular in addition to the august and celebrated" (179), and the careful balance between male and female authors reflects her desire to widen the scope of her readership in order to accommodate the marginalized female voice. Although the number of female writers discussed in volume one and two of the *Common Reader* series does not significantly vary, both volumes exude a powerful feminine energy: George Eliot; Jane Austen; Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë; Geraldine Jewsbury; Jane Welsh Carlyle; Christina Rossetti; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are some of the female Victorian figures featured, and each essay reveals Woolf's ambivalence toward her predecessors along with a tentative willingness to reconcile with her lineage. However, in order to rescue these women from their historical exile and introduce them to the common reader, Woolf must first position the female author in a physical space.

Underlying almost all of the female-oriented *Common Reader* essays is a desire to

situate their lives and experiences within a neighbourhood of foreboding Victorian houses. Emily Blair explains that the image of the Victorian house becomes a "metonymic register" (23) that helps Woolf configure the social history of the women writers who came before her, and furthermore, allows her to "reappropriate the domestic ground that fertilizes…male creativity" (24). Blair indicates that Woolf's circular movement between the "literary work, the Victorian house, the objects in the house, the people and their manners…help her to figure a definition of feminine creativity and women's fiction" (24), and through the presence of the Victorian house, Woolf reclaims domestic space as fertile ground for female ingenuity. The final essay of the *Second Common Reader,* titled "How Should One Read a Book?", demonstrates Woolf's circuitous metaphor by constructing a neighbourhood of interconnected houses where literary figures reside; in this district, "the street narrows; the house becomes small, cramped, diamond-paned, and malodorous" (261), and the reader can follow the writers that live here "through the paths that lie in the pages of books" (261) lined with "so many houses to visit and bells to ring that we may well hesitate for a moment" (261). Woolf concludes that by moving "from friend to friend, from garden to garden, from house to house, we have passed from one end of English literature to another and wake to find ourselves here again in the present" (262). By giving overlooked female writers a residence on a never-ending street lined with the homes of literary legends, Woolf assists her common reader in envisioning a neighbourhood where every literary age can contentedly coexist, and encourages her audience to knock on the doors of each house in order to reveal the obscurity that lies inside. Woolf's desire to acknowledge forgotten literary lives manifested itself nearly twenty-five years after the initial publication of her "Poets' Letters" review in the "Aurora Leigh" essay, a sympathetic and magnanimous exploration of Barrett Browning that neither deepens the reader's piteous conception of the poet's reputation nor fully reveals the mysterious woman behind *Aurora Leigh.*

In “Aurora Leigh,” Woolf articulates the absence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in modernist criticism, situating the poet in this vast district of literary houses: she declares that “the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned to her is downstairs in the servant’s quarters, where…she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife” (202). Setting aside the near impossibility of consuming peas on the narrow surface of a knife point, it is immediately apparent that at the height of her popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, Barrett Browning certainly did not spend her hours as a renowned Victorian writer simply “bang[ing] the crockery about.” Nonetheless, Woolf equates the poet’s confinement in the “dark house at Wimpole Street” where she “lay on her sofa” (202) to her eventual banishment into the basement of yet another segregated, albeit metaphorical Victorian house. In order to contextualize Barrett Browning’s imprisonment in this unusual space, Woolf opens the “Aurora Leigh” essay by meditating on the inescapable cultural prominence of the Brownings, declaring that in the twentieth century, both authors are better “known in the flesh…Passionate lovers, in curls and side whiskers, oppressed, defiant, eloping – in this guise thousands of people must know and love the Brownings who have never read a line of their poetry” (202). By briefly mentioning Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett’s courtship mythos and then rapidly redirecting her focus onto Barrett Browning, Woolf prompts the reader to notice Robert Browning’s absence from the basement of the literary mansion. Furthermore, Woolf suggests that his absence simply does not matter: Barrett Browning has been unjustly condemned, and as a modernist critic Woolf must focus on the Victorian woman poet instead of tirelessly retelling the courtship story.

Following this passing reference to the courtship, Woolf compares her subject to another poet in an attempt to unveil Barrett Browning herself: she notes that “one has only to compare her reputation with Christina Rossetti’s to trace her decline. Christina Rossetti mounts irresistibly to the first place among English women poets. Elizabeth, so much more

loudly applauded during her lifetime, falls farther and farther behind" (202). Despite the disapproval of her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who frequently told his sister that Barrett Browning possessed an undesirable "falsetto muscularity" (323), Rossetti admired the poet for much of her life and tried to emulate her poetic method in many of her early works. As Rossetti developed her craft, she began to rebel against her literary foremother, even commenting on the notoriety of her love for Robert Browning in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by creating her own sonnet sequence, *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets,* a series of poems that present an embittered, heartbroken antithesis to Barrett Browning's sweeping romance. Calling upon Rossetti in "Aurora Leigh" suggests that women rely upon the discussion of their predecessors to situate their own position in the literary tradition; thus, as the forthcoming pages will demonstrate, Woolf contextualizes herself against the backdrop of her Victorian predecessors, just as Rossetti's reputation is contrasted with Barrett Browning's.

While Rossetti comfortably resides in the literary spotlight, Woolf maintains that Barrett Browning's reputation has suffered an unfortunate fate, as "the primers dismiss her with contumely. Her importance, they say, 'has now become merely historical'" (202). In order to justify Barrett Browning's placement in her imagined mansion, Woolf selects this dismissive quotation from *English Literature from A.D. 670 to A.D. 1832* by Stopford A. Brooke that both confirms the polarizing opinions of the poet's oeuvre and demonstrates the misogyny surrounding female authorship. The act of writing an acclaimed poet into the servants' quarters provocatively forces women into the gendered spaces of the Victorian house and into a network of relationships that circumscribe these experiences. Life and literature merge in the basement of this literary mansion, and as Emily Blair posits, the "polyvalence of her language is clear…Not only does this image position Barrett Browning in a lower caste of women writers, it also demeans Barrett Browning by its class-inflected,

negative imaging of her table manners" (22). Arguably, Woolf is not as malicious as Blair imagines her to be; rather, in order to subsequently lead Barrett Browning upstairs from the basement, Woolf must first acknowledge that history has unjustly condemned her to such a fate, and the servants' quarters metaphor valorizes her feminist act of historiographic recovery. Although it is unclear whether Woolf intends to compare Barrett Browning with a lowly servant or simply place her in the physical location of the servants' quarters, this metaphor exposes the tendency of the common reader to juxtapose biography with literary production: instead of Barrett Browning's works alone residing in the basement of the literary mansion, the poet herself is condemned to that unfavourable fate.

As the poet consumes peas by the handful, Woolf mentions that Barrett Browning is "in company with Mrs Hemans, Eliza Cook, Jean Ingelow, Alexander Smith, Edwin Arnold, and Robert Montgomery" (203), all lesser known writers in the British literary world. Positioning Barrett Browning alongside these obscure writers serves to jar the audience from their reading, forcing them to consider their knowledge of the poet and question if it is true that "fate has not been kind to Mrs Browning as a writer" (202). Although Tennyson would ultimately take the title, Barrett Browning's candidacy for Poet Laureate following Wordsworth reflects her former literary prominence, and Woolf is not ignorant of this historical acclaim. Woolf recognizes that Barrett Browning was "loudly applauded during her lifetime" (202), and by placing her among the lower ranks of Victorian writers, she compels the reader to reconsider the value systems that dictate canonical status. Anna Snaith contends with the division between Woolf's universal readership and a scholarly audience that determines canonical status, theorizing that the act of retrieving the poet from the basement allows Woolf to "question[] the formation of literary canons, whose 'waste' is hidden.…In reclaiming the waste, she suggests the contingency of judgments made according to 'highbrow' standards" ("Of Fanciers" 618). In order to emphasize the discourses that

eliminate women from cultural memory, Woolf's "Aurora Leigh" essay reconfigures domestic space to highlight the intersections of class and literary culture. Moreover, Woolf also suggests that *Aurora Leigh*'s non-canonical status can be remedied through the formation of a league of common readers. By dredging up the castoffs of the canon and approaching these works through the lens of modernity, Woolf encourages her readership to perform the same rebellious act, imbuing them with the self-assuredness, curiousity, and bravery that is required to challenge the canon and forge new avenues through its male-dominated paths.

Along with the servants' quarters metaphor, Woolf's preoccupation with the contested space of the Victorian drawing-room is a focal point of the "Aurora Leigh" essay. As Woolf transitions into her discussion of *Aurora Leigh*, she depicts the book as a nostalgic, albeit antiquated object of the Victorian past, noting that readers do not take *Aurora Leigh* off the shelf to actually read it, but instead "muse with kindly condescension over this token of bygone fashion, as we toy with the fringes of our grandmothers' mantles and muse over the alabaster models of the Taj Mahal which once adorned their drawing-room tables" (203). By establishing that "to the Victorians…the book was very dear" (203) and suggesting that *Aurora Leigh* remains in the darkened interior of the nineteenth-century drawing-room, Woolf encourages her common reader to approach the novel-poem with both an appreciation of their Victorian predecessors and the vigor of a modern perspective. Perhaps, she suggests, it is time for readers to take *Aurora Leigh* off the shelf for the purposes of reading it instead of mocking it. Through the creation of a liminal space where the twentieth century common reader encounters Barrett Browning's "token of bygone fashion" among other relics of the recent Victorian past, Woolf creates a fuller picture of the claustrophobic territory that the Victorian woman inhabited, and as Kate Flint explains, "invokes sepulchral interiors and cluttered rooms as a kind of shorthand of the Victorian period…to convey…the weight of the

conventional that pressed down upon those who were cocooned by these over-stuffed spaces" (22). Not only does Woolf situate the poet in the servants' quarters, far away from the "sepulchral interior" of this Victorian drawing-room, but Barrett Browning's illness also exiles her from the drawing-room of the Wimpole Street house.

Nonetheless, Woolf acknowledges that Barrett Browning's writing allowed her to temporarily leave the isolation of the back bedroom at Wimpole Street. Woolf repeatedly quotes a passage from 1845 that conveys Barrett Browning's revolutionary aims while writing *Aurora Leigh*: she wishes to write a novel-poem that is capable of "running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms…and…meeting face to face and without mask, the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth as I conceive of it" ("EBB to RB" 103-4). Woolf echoes this passage, arguing that the poet "was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet" (213). Blair explains Woolf's reliance on the drawing-room metaphor, arguing that the drawing-room and bedroom were the only spaces that Victorian women could claim in a masculine domain: she postulates that "the drawing room is…the site of women's social history, the site where women struggle to produce, and the site where women balance the competing demands of domesticity and artistry" (30). One of Woolf's prevailing intentions in "Aurora Leigh" is to celebrate Aurora's subversive reclamation of the Victorian house as a site for artistic creation, independent from the demands of patriarchy. Thus, Woolf acknowledges that Barrett Browning voices her experiences through Aurora, both as an invalid in the privacy of her home, an artist in the public spotlight, and a woman in between these spaces.

After the reader wanders through the drawing room and servants' quarters of the literary mansion, Woolf welcomes her audience into Aurora Leigh's residence. Similar to Barrett Browning's back bedroom education in the house at Wimpole Street, Aurora's aunt

provides her with a domestic education that Woolf states "was thought proper for women… Under this torture of women's education…certain women have died; others pine… walk demurely, and are civil to their cousins and listen to the vicar and pour out tea" (204-5). Emphasizing the tedious nature of Aurora's schooling, Woolf criticizes the protagonist's stagnant life of quietude, describing a world in which she creates model flowers out of wax during the day and cross-stitches by night. However, Woolf emphasizes the life that literature breathes into Aurora's residence with her aunt, and she quotes at length from Barrett Browning's passionate verses on the effects of "plung[ing] Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound" (1.706-7). By recognizing that reading both rejuvenates Aurora and gives her reprieve from mundane lessons of domesticity, Woolf affirms the unrealized potential of the undereducated women in Barrett Browning's era, and as Bina Freiwald explains, Woolf's essay is "marked by profound ambivalence, an ambivalence perhaps best understood in the context of Woolf's own anxiety over gender and writing" (330). This ambivalence is manifested in Woolf's oxymoronic observations about the poem, as she leaps from praising Barrett Browning's willingness to represent "modern life" (213) to disparaging her outmoded writing style and Aurora's educational circumstances. In order to emphasize the intellectual and spiritual starvation of Aurora as she pursues her domestic education, Woolf paints a picture of an overwhelmingly verdant bedroom, remarking that "Aurora herself was blessed with a little room. It was green papered, had a green carpet and there were green curtains to the bed, as if to match the insipid greenery of the English countryside" (205). In this passage, the idyllic nature of the English pastoral becomes an oppressive, inescapable force that transforms Aurora's good fortune in possessing a room of her own into a claustrophobic nightmare. While in *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf emphasizes the necessity, for the woman writer, of possessing a room of her own and "five hundred a year" (37), her tone in "Aurora Leigh" shifts; thus, Aurora does have a room of her own and enough resources to sustain

herself, but she is still overshadowed by her aunt's nineteenth-century definition of womanhood. Emerging from Woolf's impassioned investigation of the nineteenth-century woman as both back-bedroom pupil and blossoming artist is the connection between Barrett Browning's lived experiences and her fictional counterpart, Aurora Leigh.

In order to demonstrate the similarities between Barrett Browning's life and her fiction, Woolf conjectures that the Victorians were preoccupied with the relationship between art and life, especially in their evaluations of female literary production: she explains that in the early 1840s, "the connection between a woman's art and a woman's life was unnaturally close" which often inadvertently led even "the most austere of critics" to "touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page" (206). Whereas Woolf's other *Common Reader* essays on female Victorian writers carefully juxtapose biography with literary production and avoid prolonged contact with the "flesh" of the author, "Aurora Leigh" focuses almost entirely on Barrett Browning herself instead of her fictional worlds. Woolf posits that Barrett Browning uncovers a newfound sense of identity through the writing of *Aurora Leigh,* claiming that "Aurora the fictitious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual" (206). Many of the *Common Reader* essays present biography as a judicious means through which the common reader can learn about author's writing process, and "Aurora Leigh" is no exception; in fact, Woolf encourages the reader to throw light upon "Elizabeth the actual" as they read *Aurora Leigh,* telling her readership that "instead of rehearsing the well-known facts, it is better to read in her own words her own account" (206) of "what damage…her life [had] done her as a poet" (207). Woolf encourages her readers to acquaint themselves with Barrett Browning's storied past by including excerpts from the poet's letters, inserting a quotation that expresses the poet's struggles with female authorship: "I have had much of the inner life," she wrote in a letter to Robert Browning, "but how willingly I would as a poet exchange some of this lumbering, ponderous, helpless knowledge of books, for some

experience of life and man" (qtd. in Woolf 207). This aching desire for corporeal experience is echoed in Aurora's buoyant refrain that "the world of books is still the world / and both worlds have God's providence" (1.792-3). The reality of the poet collides with the worlds she creates, and as Woolf quips, when the reader hears Aurora's voice, "the circumstances, the idiosyncrasies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning ring in our ears. Mrs Browning could no more conceal herself than she could control herself" (205). Woolf is correct in concluding that biographical idiosyncrasies underscore *Aurora Leigh,* as both Barrett Browning and Aurora search for solace and external knowledge in the sequestered spaces of their father's libraries; suffer the tragic loss of their mothers at a young age; and face the threat of courtship to the artistic self. Woolf therefore conjoins the overlooked history of Barrett Browning with the fictionalized experiences of Aurora, celebrating Barrett Browning and her works without emphasizing her romantic history. Thus, Woolf begins to lead the poet upstairs from the servants' quarters and toward a maternal literary genealogy.

In a letter to Henry Fothergill Chorley, Barrett Browning lamented the difficulties in creating a female literary tradition, writing that "I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none" ("EBB to Henry" 14). This excerpt exemplifies the early Victorian aspiration to construct a literary sisterhood, rising up from the male-dominated leagues of the canon and carving out a much-needed space for female creativity. Despite Barrett Browning's unsuccessful attempt to locate literary grandmothers, she greatly admired the work of contemporaries such as George Sand, Charlotte Brontë, and two of her close writerly companions, Elizabeth Gaskell and Mary Russell Mitford. Deborah Byrd explains that through these relationships, Barrett Browning "was empowered by her discovery of literary foremothers and sisters…she often defined herself in relation to other literary women…trying to accomplish where they had failed" (24). Although Barrett Browning frequently emphasized her devotion to the canonical school of "the grandfathers" ("EBB to Henry" 14)

and generally regarded Wordsworth, Tennyson and Byron above any other contemporaries, she acknowledged her presence in a small sisterhood of Victorian women writers, refusing to hide behind a male pseudonym and instead proudly occupying her position as female writer. An excerpt from an unfinished 1842 poem best encompasses Barrett Browning's enduring rally cry for a sisterly union: she passionately asks, "My sisters! Daughters of this Fatherland! /…Give me your ear & heart – Grant me your voice / Do confirm my voice – lest it speak in vain" (qtd in Stone and Taylor 394). Although this excerpt is one of many attempts in her works to rousingly call upon the women of England, her desire for sisters and daughters to "confirm her voice" is certainly epitomized in *Aurora Leigh,* one of her most spirited attempts to pay homage to her literary sisters and forge a new path for the future daughters of her age. With the publication of *Aurora Leigh* in 1856*,* Barrett Browning's lifelong preoccupation with forging sisterly connections among non-familial kin conjoins with her lifelong quest to delineate the meaning of nineteenth-century woman as artist. Woolf not only recognizes the poet's revolutionary, undeniably modern aims in writing the novel-poem, but she also seeks to reposition Barrett Browning as a grandmother of her own.

At the beginning of *Aurora Leigh,* Aurora retrospectively observes that "Of writing many books there is no end; / And I who have written much in prose and verse…/ Will write my story for my better self" (1. 1-4). In this moment of self-reflection, it is unclear whether Aurora or Barrett Browning is stating her artistic manifesto, and this blending of voices epitomizes Woolf's observation that Barrett Browning's idiosyncrasies "ring in our ears" (205) as the reader turns the pages of *Aurora Leigh*. Nonetheless, Barrett Browning's message in the opening lines is abundantly clear: women must write their stories in order to be acknowledged, and as she later demonstrates through the fortuitous friendship between Marian Erle and Aurora, one of the best ways to share these stories is through the establishment of a powerful sisterhood. Through the sisterly bond between Marian and

Aurora, Barrett Browning demonstrates the Victorian reliance on female kinship as both a survival mechanism and an act of resistance against the patriarchal machinations that circumscribe female life; thus, Aurora graciously asks Marian to "Come with me, sweetest sister" (7.117) into a nurturing, maternal world that allows mothers, daughters, and sisters to materialize without preexisting lineage. Woolf recognizes Barrett Browning's emphasis on the interconnectedness of female experience, and the language that she employs echoes this notion: Woolf states that *Aurora Leigh* is "a masterpiece in embryo; a work whose genius floats diffused and fluctuating in some pre-natal stage waiting the final stroke of creative power to bring it into being" (208). To emphasize the unrealized potential of Barrett Browning's abilities, Woolf explains that the novel-poem remains isolated in embryo because the poet's "long years of seclusion had done her irreparable damage as an artist" (208). Through the image of *Aurora Leigh* as a primordial work, Woolf maintains that both Barrett Browning's lack of literary grandmothers and her marginalized position as a female poet situate her in an ever-lasting embryonic condition, tentatively hovering in a state of volatility.

Furthermore, the concept of woman writer as embryo underscores Woolf's own perception of herself as an artist, serving to accentuate her own birth as a woman writer. As Freiwald explains, Woolf's reading of *Aurora Leigh* transforms the novel-poem into "a locus of conception as well as the birth-place of the woman artist…she witnesses the woman poet giving birth to herself – and her daughter – in a true union of 'art' and 'life,' of 'flesh' and 'page'" (330). Akin to her declarations in *A Room of One's Own* that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births" (65) and that Shakespeare's sister "will be born" by "drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners" (95), Woolf employs the circular language of rebirth to symbolize an upcoming generation of writers who acknowledge a collective literary history and who, in turn, will be born anew through this process. Through her meticulous recovery of female Victorian writers in the *Common Reader*

series, Woolf not only emphasizes the important role of the reading public in this reclamation process, but she also suggests that works such as *Aurora Leigh* have allowed for her own conception and birth as a modernist writer.

Similar to Woolf's resolute belief in *A Room of One's Own* that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (75), Aurora tenaciously pursues her career as poet in *Aurora Leigh* in order to become "woman and artist, - either incomplete, / Both credulous of completion" (2. 4-5). Despite Romney's disbelief that Aurora will successfully establish a career as a female writer, Aurora persists in her mission to exercise "the artist's instinct…at the cost / Of putting down the woman's" (9. 646-47), much like Barrett Browning's determination to pursue her artistry despite the discouragement of critics. Thus, both Aurora and Barrett Browning's determination to disregard gendered boundaries, silence the naysayers, and pursue an artistic calling embodies the message at the heart of the *Common Reader* series: all literature is part of an interconnected lineage, and for women writers, this genealogy carries an enduring maternal energy. By critically approaching the maternal narratives surrounding nineteenth-century woman writers while also embracing female literary history as an interdependent, matrilineal succession, Woolf encourages her twentieth-century readership to assert their participation in this lineage. Instead of worshipping these predecessors as models of creative perfection, Woolf encourages her readership to learn from the flaws of their ancestors and forge onward. Woolf calls Aurora "the true daughter of her age" (212) because of her "passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, [and] her longing for knowledge and freedom" (212) and sees herself in the same light, an anomalous daughter of her age who finds strength and solidarity through the recognition of her foremothers. By acknowledging the maternal forces of the past, Woolf emboldens her readership to confidently reach toward "our grandmother's mantles" (203) and acknowledge these female predecessors, all by gingerly extracting *Aurora Leigh* from its

position as a relic of the past.

Despite her bewilderment with the archaic form of *Aurora Leigh,* Woolf concludes her essay with a compelling argument for Barrett Browning's modernity. After demonstrating the complexities of blank verse narration, Woolf argues that Barrett Browning's writing style is "forced by the nature of the medium" and thus overlooks the "more hidden shades of emotion by which a novelist builds up touch by touch a character in prose" (211). Woolf finds that the poet's characters, although "impassioned" (211) and "exquisite" (208), are often one-dimensional due to the blank verse format. Nonetheless, only a few sentences later, Woolf affirms the power of *Aurora Leigh*'s legacy, writing that "if she meant rather to give us a sense of life in general, of people who are unmistakably Victorian…she succeeded" (212). Woolf begins to bridge the gap between modernism and her Victorian past, slowly transitioning from the binary thinking that defines Bloomsbury's anti-Victorian otherness into an uncharted territory that amalgamates the Victorian and modern worlds. Although she initially positions Barrett Browning's work on the mantles of abandoned libraries, Woolf discovers a modernity within *Aurora Leigh*'s archaic formalities, and concludes by celebrating the poet's contemporary inclinations: she proclaims that "the best compliment that we can pay *Aurora Leigh* is that it makes us wonder why it has left no successors. Surely the street, the drawing-room, are promising subjects; modern life is worthy of the muse" (213). With this profound statement, the ambivalence of the essayist dissipates and Woolf's authentic appreciation for Barrett Browning's work surfaces. She recognizes that *Aurora Leigh* is a product of a different era, but instead of berating this discovery, she sweepingly declares that "we have no novel-poem of the age of George the Fifth" (213). Precariously positioned between her Victorian predecessors and an emerging modernity, Woolf concludes her *Aurora Leigh* essay by demonstrating that common ground exists between these two eras, and furthermore, encourages her common readership to perceive the same connections in

their reading. While Woolf claims that her common reader is an anonymous, genderless figure, the "Aurora Leigh" essay exemplifies her preoccupation in the *Common Reader* series with literary foremothers, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters. And, arguably, she contentedly situates herself as one of Barrett Browning's own granddaughters.

The stairs from the basement of the literary mansion hesitantly creak, and Woolf herself appears around the corner with Barrett Browning at her side, but she is not finished with her recovery project just yet; indeed, in the same year as her publication of "Aurora Leigh," Woolf would begin to write *Flush,* and her 1931 draft would further her mission to reclaim Barrett Browning from the depths of obscurity.

CHAPTER TWO:

"I AM RATHER PROUD OF MY FACTS": BIOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING IN THE 1931 DRAFT OF *FLUSH*

In a letter written to Helen McAfee in July of 1931, Woolf chronicled her impressions of Rudolf Besier's 1930 play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street,* writing that "I myself was rather disappointed, though amused by the astonishing story…But they might have made it hit harder I thought" (4: 351). Set in the mid-1840s, Besier's play dramatizes the tumultuous relationship between Edward Moulton-Barrett, Barrett Browning's tyrannical father, and his nine children. At the time of Besier's production, existing biographies on Barrett Browning focused on her partnership with Robert Browning, and this limited biographical focus led to the melodramatic undertones of Besier's play. Lilian Whiting's *A Study of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1899), Germaine-Marie Merlette's *La Vie et l'oeuvre d'Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1905), Percy Lubbock's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Letters* (1906), Irene Cooper Willis' *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1928), and Isabel C. Clarke's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Portrait* (1929) preceded both Besier's play and Woolf's publications on Barrett Browning, but many of these biographies relied upon speculative and inaccurate interpretations of her letters and works. Of these biographies, Woolf reviewed only Percy Lubbock's book, and although she concludes that Lubbock did "Barrett Browning and her readers a substantial service" by "prompting her…to speak just those words which explain herself and connecting them with…comments of his own" ("Poets' Letters" 104), Lubbock overlooks Barrett Browning's pioneering work by relying upon sentimental recollections of her courtship. Indeed, many pre-1930 biographies on Barrett Browning accentuate her romantic connection to Robert Browning, or in some cases, summarize her life in order to celebrate her husband's accomplishments. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* continues in this vein, characterizing the poet as a defenseless victim of a misogynist system that preys upon

her vulnerabilities and forces her to depend upon her male counterparts. As Julia Novak observes, Besier's play depicts her as "an entirely relational creature, defined through and dependent on, first, her possessive father, and later, increasingly, her 'life-giving' bridegroom" (88). While Besier's histrionic depiction may have been enough to prompt Woolf's scrupulous investigation of the Victorian poet's life, one particular scene may be credited with provoking her subsequent work: in act three, cousin Bella exclaims, "Oh, wouldn't it be fwightfully intewesting if only dear Flush could speak!" (85), and explains to Barrett Browning's sister, Arabella, that "dear Flush is the only witness of all that goes on at Ba's weekly *tête-à-tête* with the handsomest poet in England" (85). Shortly after seeing Besier's play, Woolf began to write a semi-biographical novel that not only addresses cousin Bella's remarks, but also emphasizes the meticulous recovery process that the feminist biographer must undertake to write the neglected history of her literary foremothers. As both a playful response to Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* and a commentary on the exclusion of female Victorian writers from the canon, Woolf's *Flush: A Biography* illuminates the difficulties of representing life through biography, rejects Barrett Browning's romanticized portrayal, and attempts to recover an overlooked female literary life, threatened by the possibility of fading into obscurity.

Originally titled *The Life, Character, and Opinions of Flush the Spaniel,* but later shortened to *Flush: A Biography,* Woolf began the first draft of her novel on July 21st, 1931 and a second draft between July 31st and October 8th, 1932. Along with both versions of the manuscripts, the Berg collection contains holograph and typewritten versions of Woolf's reading notes in preparation for *Flush*, including notes on Barrett Browning's correspondence; observations on Mary Russell Mitford's letters and biography; notes on Victorian London as depicted in *The Rookeries of London* by Thomas Beames; research on the cocker spaniel from Hugh Dalziel's *British Dogs*; and an early draft of the "Authorities"

section at the end of the book. These sources not only reveal Woolf's intentions for *Flush,* but they also illustrate how biographical research circumscribed her writing process. *Flush* was initially published as a serial in the *Atlantic Monthly* in four installments from July to October of 1933, and each section had a title, minor grammatical changes, and conclusions with dramatic hooks that anticipated the next publication. Shortly after the serial ended, *Flush* was published by the Hogarth Press in Britain and the United States on October 5th, 1933 with additional revisions and subtler chapter conclusions. While all of these materials are valuable in the study of *Flush*'s origins, the 1931 draft of *Flush* best represents Woolf's intention to recover Barrett Browning's neglected biography and acknowledge the recent past to inform an imminent modernity.

In the early months of *Flush*'s conception, Woolf aimed to create a truthful, female-focused narrative emphasizing the oppressive patriarchal structures that Barrett Browning overcame to achieve literary renown. Instead of introducing Flush as the protagonist, Woolf reconstructs Barrett Browning's life narrative by recreating the ambience of her correspondence, and this strategy underscores her role as feminist biographer. Although the 1931 draft commences with the same historical recounting of Flush's origins as the 1933 version, Flush's consciousness is either barely alluded to in the 1931 version or is omitted in favour of reproducing Barrett Browning's perspective word-for-word. Similar to her research notes, the 1931 draft reproduces names, dates, and quotations directly from her sources and rarely rephrases the words of others. The 1933 text, on the other hand, "provides examples where sometimes sources are disclosed but at other times concealed, examples of verbatim quotation and examples of rewording… materials from different sources are conflated and…the chronology of the sequence of letters is ignored" (Peach 205). Indeed, in the published version of *Flush,* Woolf quotes from Barrett Browning's letters only sparingly and lists only a few of her sources, with a disclaimer that "there are very few authorities for the

foregoing biography" (107). In contrast to this minimalistic approach, the 1931 draft includes lengthy quotations from Barrett Browning's letters to emphasize the scope of her biographical project and affirm the value of historical women's voices. Although *Flush* later transformed into a modernist experiment, Woolf's original intentions are preserved in the 1931 draft, and this chapter will examine her initial determination to fairly represent the life of an overlooked female Victorian writer.

When Woolf began the first draft of *Flush,* she intended to participate in a playful dialogue with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians,* a biographical work about Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold, and General Gordon. While Strachey's biography sought to revitalize Victorian lives, his approach was unconventionally concise and frequently unflattering for his biographical subjects, especially when compared to the multivolume tomes of the Victorian biographical tradition. Strachey would justify his logic in the preface to *Eminent Victorians,* explaining that he wished to defy the "two fat volumes…with their ill-digested masses of material…and tedious panegyric…as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker" (5). This "tedious panegyric" was characteristic of Victorian biography, and as Alison Booth explains, the modernists distanced themselves by seeking to "detach the genre from the ancient function of honouring the dead and modelling character….They insisted on the truth…but not too much of the truth in undigested masses; there must be discrimination" ("Life writing" 52). With Strachey's work in mind, Woolf sorted through these "undigested masses" in order to create her own portrait of two unconventional eminent Victorians: a female poet, ushered into the servant's quarters after decades of literary prominence, and her canine companion, devoid of subjectivity but an important participant in Barrett Browning's life.

Before analyzing Woolf's female biographical subject in the 1931 draft of *Flush,* it is necessary to discuss her exploration of Barrett Browning's dog. In the first draft of *Flush,*

Woolf briefly describes Flush's ancestry, but her focus oscillates between emphasizing the cultural eminence of Barrett Browning and illuminating Flush's significance in her life. Although Woolf begins her draft with Flush's origin story, she relies upon Barrett Browning's letters to relay Flush's heritage, ultimately resisting the omniscient narration of the published version. As this chapter will demonstrate, the 1931 draft does not focus on Flush's narrative subjectivity. Instead of narrativizing the experiences of a non-human animal, Woolf originally sought to uncover the relationship between Barrett Browning and her dog, especially in the context of the patriarchal subjugation of Victorian women. Flush, like Barrett Browning, is confined to the back bedroom at Wimpole Street, and he has the same limitations as his mistress; as Susan Squier posits, "from the liminal position of exile – for Flush, from the human race; for Barrett Browning, from the world of patriarchal London…[*Flush*] indicts London society of the Victorian era for its restrictions, its hypocrisies, its unholy alliances that oppress women and other marginal groups" (136). In the 1931 draft, Flush does not bear witness to these injustices by describing his impressions; instead, he is an accomplice that reveals much about the biographical subject herself by occupying the role of a faithful, albeit oblivious canine companion. In Strachey's terms, Woolf's 1931 draft positions Barrett Browning as the "eminent Victorian" with Flush as her obedient companion. Later, in the published version, Woolf would jokingly position Flush as a contender for the "eminent Victorian" title.

Woolf's preparation of a reading notebook reveals the extent of her biographical inquiry and demonstrates her fascination with Barrett Browning as "eminent Victorian." According to Brenda Silver, Woolf amassed sixty-seven reading notebooks in her lifetime, and although these notebooks act "as a repository of facts and ideas for her articles and reviews" (4) and "provide proof…of her commitment as both literary and social critic," these volumes "represent only a fraction of what she actually read" (3). The undated reading

notebook holographs for *Flush* contain a mixture of sources, but as Elizabeth Steele affirms, "the single research notebook devoted to *Flush*…contains no notes for several of the books that influenced Woolf's narrative. What the notebook does contain are about twenty-five pages of material taken from eight separate sources" (xviii). These sources reappear in the "Authorities" section of the 1931 draft, but a few notable omissions[2] from both her reading notes and the 1931 draft reveal the breadth of her research, something that she repeatedly downplays by emphasizing the "very few authorities" (107) for *Flush*. At first, the reading notes appear disjointed and messy, but as Brenda Silver explains, "the mixture of inks and the typewritten versions of notes that also exist in holograph indicate both the sporadic nature of Woolf's readings for her life of Flush and the care she took over the details" (158). The notes are undated, but the dissimilarity of the reading notebook fragments indicates small expanses of time between each reading, and as Silver mentions, Woolf's strange mixture of mediums confirms the intermittency of her research process.

Although Woolf was initially determined to produce an engaging chronicle of Barrett Browning's life, her methodology was far from pedantic; indeed, as Steele clarifies, although Woolf was "renowned chiefly for her lyrical imagination, [she] grew into something of a scholar – not always precise, not consistent or thorough, but still impressive…whereas a pedant notes far more than he or she can ever use, Woolf knew what she wanted" (xviii). While Woolf chose quotations from Barrett Browning's correspondence that emphasized the poet's ingenuity and conformed to her feminist narration, the reading notes also manifest Woolf's creative process; thus, she often wrote down facts that were either useless to her biographical project, or simply did not appear in any of her drafts. For example, in her section

[2] Sources that are quoted with no corresponding pages in the reading notebook or mention in her "Authorities" include Thomas Beames' *The Rookeries of London*, although this source is later cited in all versions of the "Authorities" and quoted repeatedly in the "Whitechapel" chapter; Mrs Sutherland Orr's *Life and Letters of Browning*; Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The French and Italian Notebooks*; and Mrs. Huth Jackson's *A Victorian Childhood*, with all four appearing in Woolf's published endnotes.

on letters to Richard Hengist Horne, she quotes Barrett Browning on life after marriage, writing that she is "rather transformed than improved" ("Reading Notes" 10) and writes about Barrett Browning's resulting spiritualism, both ideas that were not related to the plot of *Flush* but captured Woolf's attention. Woolf's reading notes provide a glimpse into the recovery process, but her research is certainly not exhaustive, nor does it aspire to be. While Woolf's notes on *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning addressed to Richard Hengist Horne* or *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* contain dates, page numbers, quotations, and information about Barrett Browning's life, her notes on Hugh Dalziel's *British Dogs* and the *Letters of Mary Russell Mitford* contain only brief fragments of historical context that intrigued her. Whereas the reading notes occasionally reflect Woolf's interest in Barrett Browning's relationship with Flush, most of Woolf's focus is on specific events in Barrett Browning's life, an emphasis on biography that indicates Woolf's original aim of reassessing the misunderstood Victorian poet through a feminist lens.

After compiling her reading notes, Woolf began the first draft of *Flush,* and her diaries and correspondence illuminate the tribulations of her process. On August 16th, 1931, only one month in, Woolf wrote in her diary, "I cannot write my life of Flush, because the rhythm is wrong…And what will the reviewers say?" (4: 40). The rhythm in her first draft is more calculated than the effusive prose of the published version. Thus, Woolf's first draft not only reflects her insecurities about the potential criticisms of her reading public, but it also reveals the immense responsibility of depicting a historically misunderstood female figure. The fact that Woolf soon senses "the rhythm is wrong" illustrates her determination to capture the essence of the biographical subject. Later in this diary entry, Woolf affirms the project of recovery, writing that "it is a good idea I think to write biographies; to make them use my powers of representation reality accuracy; & to use my novels simply to express the general, the poetic. Flush is serving this purpose" (4: 40). From the beginning, Woolf not

only focused on achieving "representation reality accuracy," but also sought to cultivate an appreciation in her audience for Barrett Browning's extraordinary life. As Juliette Atkinson posits, "Woolf is concerned with how individuals, but above all women, have been excluded from official discourses…to uncover hidden female lives is, for Woolf, to uncover a narrative of oppression" (256). Woolf recognizes that Barrett Browning's story is threatened by the possibility of erasure, and she views her recovery project as an opportunity to champion women neglected by history. Although Woolf later abandoned her conventional biographical mode, she would write a feminist history of Barrett Browning in order to arrive at her canine-centric narrative. The first draft of *Flush* reveals this desire to prevent the poet's retreat into obscurity.

By September 16th, 1931, Woolf's diary entries express her growing frustrations with her initial draft: she writes, "I'm in such a tremor that I've botched the last – penultimate chapter of Flush – is it worth writing that book - & can scarcely sit still, & must therefore scribble here, making myself form my letters" (4: 123). In the following days, Woolf revised the final chapter of *Flush* three times, oscillating between a focus on Flush and Barrett Browning, and finally, arriving at a fifth chapter that remained nearly unchanged throughout the editing process. Throughout December of 1931, Woolf chronicled the arduous drafting process in her diary, writing that

> I shall take up Flush again to cool myself. By Heaven, I have written 60,320 words since Oct. 11th. I think this must be far the quickest going of any of my books: comes far ahead of Orlando or The Lighthouse. But then those 60 thousand will have to be sweated & dried into 30 or 40 thousand – a great grind to come. Never mind. I have secured the outline & fixed a shape for the rest. (4: 132)

In an undated holograph titled "Last Chapter," Woolf appears to "secure the outline" and "fix a shape for the rest" by listing each fact that she anticipates writing about, including "Mrs. B

on the rock"; "the house at Pisa"; "freedom: ideals crumble"; "Whitechapel"; and "the hush of the baby" ("The life, character" 3). The margins of her chapter five revisions are riddled with corrections, suggestions, and facts taken directly from historical sources, including page and volume numbers from the letters and the names of those involved in the correspondence. Woolf lists twenty-four different subjects on her outline, and most of these elements resurface in the final version of her draft. However, after extensive revisions, Woolf separated her fifth chapter into two parts, titling the fifth chapter "Life in Italy and Love" and later changing it to "Italy and Love," and then writing a sixth chapter titled "Last Years and Death" that concentrates on the deaths of Flush and Barrett Browning.

Despite Woolf's frustrations while writing *Flush,* the chapter five and six drafts retain a biographical focus, and thus reflect Woolf's determination to unearth the poet's life through her own words. While over half of the biographical episodes in the first draft of *Flush* are omitted in the published version, the conclusion of the 1931 draft includes lengthy quotations that demonstrate Woolf's original intention to impart Barrett Browning's narrative through verbatim passages. The 1931 draft contains numerous instances where Woolf quotes her sources at length, but a few examples best reflect her preoccupation with the historical facts of Barrett Browning's life. In the 1933 version of *Flush,* the political march in the streets of Florence is paraphrased and Barrett Browning finds an "inexplicable satisfaction in the trampling of forty thousand people, in the promises of Grand Dukes and the windy aspirations of banners" while Flush observes "the little dog at the door" (80). In contrast, the third revision of chapter five in the 1931 draft retains Barrett Browning's observation in a letter that "[Flush] takes the Grand Duke as a sort of neighbour of his, whom it is proper enough to patronize" ("EBB to Mary" 28). In some instances, Woolf writes a quotation, crosses it out, and then rephrases Barrett Browning's words as closely as possible. Initially, she reproduces Barrett Browning's explanation that "writing of Flush, in my uncle comes, &

then my cousin, & then my aunt…and now it is nearly four & this letter may be too late for the post" ("EBB to RB" 138), but she later alters Barrett Browning's words by writing "uncles, cousins, aunts -…they were all so many obstacles that got in the way of her finishing her letter in time for the afternoon post" ("Chapter Two" 22). Woolf not only immerses herself in the details of Barrett Browning's letters, but also integrates Barrett Browning's language into her writing, even if the context for the quotations is not entirely accurate. For example, when she describes Flush, Woolf borrows the phrase "like a sunbeam" ("Chapter Two" 5) from the letters to justify his beauty, but the letter with the originating phrase uses "like a sunbeam" to describe Miss Mitford's presence: she writes, "you can't imagine what it is to lose you like a sunbeam lost, & to have to sit on in the dark" ("EBB to Mary" 42). Along with mirroring Barrett Browning's language and incorporating quotations from the correspondence, Woolf employs phrasing that verifies her narrative (i.e. "she said, he said"; "apparently"; "according to"), whereas in the published version, she uses modalities to imply that an event may have occurred. Finally, in the published text, Woolf changes two significant historical facts to accommodate her narrative: the number of dog-napping incidents and the details of the elopement scheme.

In the published version, *Flush* is taken from Barrett Browning only once. However, in the 1931 draft, Woolf refers to all three dognapping incidents, elaborating on only one of them for brevity.[3] In the published version, Woolf relegates the multiple dognapping incidents to the endnotes, acknowledging that "as a matter of fact, Flush was stolen three times; but the unities seem to require that the three stealings shall be compressed into one" (109). Although the published version of the "Whitechapel" chapter contains some passages from Barrett Browning's letters, these quotations demonstrate Flush's emotional distress, whereas the quotations in the 1931 draft convey Barrett Browning's perceptions of the

[3] In the 1931 draft, Woolf writes that "once already Flush had been claimed; indeed it is said that they had twice stolen him and given him back for a payment of six guineas" ("Chapter Two" 59).

dognapping. Woolf also discusses how Barrett Browning escaped from the Wimpole Street house to elope with Robert Browning, explaining that "it was said, openly, that the house was going to be painted…it was very dark, it was very dirty; and then there was talk of going into the country while the house was painted. They were going…to a place called Great Bookham" ("Chapter Two" 83). Eight letters reference this move, but a postmarked letter from September 17th, 1846 specifically emphasizes the urgency of Barrett Browning's escape: responding to Barrett Browning's inquiry about their departure, Robert Browning wrote that "these difficulties will multiply if you go to Bookham – the way will be to leave at once" ("RB to EBB" 375). In the published version, Woolf alters this detail by depicting Flush and Barrett Browning quietly leaving Wimpole Street in a cab "to Hodgson's" (71), a bookstore in London, while Flush struggles to understand the motivation behind their departure. Whereas Woolf emulates some of Barrett Browning's vernacular in the published version of *Flush*, the 1931 draft manifests Woolf's mission to respect the lived experiences of her female subject by including the poet's words on nearly every page.

In the first draft, Woolf excerpts Barrett Browning's letters while minimizing Flush's ability to understand human life, an approach that is antithetical to the published version. After the Whitechapel dognapping, Woolf describes Barrett Browning's response to the banditti, writing that "these creatures, she knew, only wanted money: and, hard pressed for money…she was at the moment, hard pressed in many ways of which Flush for all his acumen could have little inkling" ("Chapter Two" 70). Flush's traumatizing experience in captivity is absent in the 1931 draft, and on numerous occasions, Woolf denies Flush's subjectivity, writing that "as Miss Barrett said, Flush was completely ignorant" ("Chapter Two" 67). Instead of presenting Flush's perceptions through an omniscient narrator, Woolf initially views Flush as an "ignorant" animal because this is how Barrett Browning herself perceives her dog. She resists depicting Flush as more than the dog of a famous poet, and

while she does illuminate his heritage and admire his distinguished pedigree, she ultimately emphasizes that Flush has "little inkling" of the historical events unfolding around him.

Although Woolf's original title, *The Life, Character, and Opinions of Flush the Spaniel,* suggests canine subjectivity by implying that Flush possesses opinions of his own, the title misrepresents the content of the 1931 draft. Woolf's decision to change the title to *Flush: A Biography* indicates her progressive movement from Victorian modes of storytelling to a modernist method, and moreover, reflects her discontent with the role of Flush in the first draft. The 1931 title evokes Victorian biographies, whereas the revised title declares the book a biography while also problematizing that assertion with its canine subject. In the first draft, Woolf struggles to balance the biographical conventions of her Victorian past and life writing in her modernist present. Janine Utell explains Woolf's navigation within the liminal space between modernist auto/biography and the biographical models of the past, suggesting that "the genre exerted a magnetic pull on [Woolf because]… of her 'interest in the 'contingency of the self' (96); and… her own writing back to her father…an exemplar of the 'granite' mode of Victorian biography, dedicated to censorious memorialisation as opposed to Woolf's 'rainbow' of personality" (30).[4] Despite Woolf's grievances with the first version of *Flush,* it allowed her to adhere to the granite-like substance of the historical past, and then freed her to disregard that hallowed traditionalism in favour of a prismatic, variegated approach.

Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, was a prolific biographer of the granite-like biographical tradition, and his work on *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1885) prompted Woolf's emphatic distinction between the Victorian and the modern. The 1931 manuscript of *Flush* demonstrates Woolf's discomfort with traditional biography, and furthermore, acknowledges her father's monumental influence on her writing life. Woolf

[4] In this passage, Utell references a quote from Woolf's "The New Biography" (1927) declaring that although "the days of Victorian biography are over" (478), the "biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to represent that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" (478) is yet to be discovered.

inherited all sixty-three volumes of *The Dictionary of National Biography* after her father's passing in 1904, and she was almost certainly familiar with the entry for Barrett Browning. Upon opening the volume containing it, Woolf would have found a detailed, nearly five-page long essay, written by the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray, Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie, chronicling the major elements of Barrett Browning's life and work. Although the entry does describe Barrett Browning's poetry as "the highest human expression of feeling," (79), it cites "personal information from Mrs. Browning, Lady Carmichael, and Mr J. Dykes Campbell" (82) as its sources – and attributes Barrett Browning's genius to the "happy influence of Mrs. Browning's marriage" (81).

In a 1901 supplement to the *DNB* that Woolf also inherited from her father, Victorian author Edmund Gosse summarizes Robert Browning's biography, and although the entry is longer than Barrett Browning's, Gosse acknowledges that she "was already celebrated as a poet, and had, indeed, achieved a far wider reputation than Browning" (309) prior to her marriage. Instead of accepting the emphasis on Barrett Browning's life in her *DNB* entry, Woolf pursues the hint in Gosse's remark by recovering the female poet, eclipsed by the legend of her romance. While the *DNB* portrays Barrett Browning as a fragile invalid who was reliant on her husband as a muse, Woolf affirms that the poet's pioneering works long preceded her famous courtship. This divide between Barrett Browning's romantic life and writing life is a source of struggle in the 1931 draft of *Flush.* By comparing Woolf's approach to the courtship in the two versions of *Flush*, we can see her developing focus on female recovery. As she progresses from the first draft to the last, Robert Browning is gradually relegated to a lesser role in the narrative of Barrett Browning's life.

In the final version, Flush perceives Robert Browning as "the hooded man," and this ominous figure appears as the title of chapter three: he describes "the cowled and sinister figure of midnight" (37) that appears "like a burglar, rattling the door" (35). The 1931 draft,

on the other hand, describes Barrett Browning's impressions of her suitor: Woolf elucidates that Robert Browning "was dark, might be called handsome, and was dressed rather as a dandy, with lemon-coloured kid gloves. He had…straight black hair, small eyes wide apart…a smooth face; an… aquiline nose" ("Chapter Two" 13). Instead of introducing him as "the hooded man," Woolf depicts Robert Browning as a stately and personable individual with a presence that demands Barrett Browning's attention. Woolf describes the heightening affection between the lovers, writing as though she occupies Barrett Browning's consciousness: "He has a great vivacity," Woolf explains, "and he has a very great frankness and friendliness of manner and mind" ("Chapter Two" 13). While Woolf illuminates the tender connection between Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, she resists the sentimentality of other biographers, instead emphasizing Barrett Browning's agency in the affair: her "engagements with Mr Browning…naturally dazzled her eyes and aroused her affection. ("Chapter Two" 26).

Alongside her depictions of the Brownings' courtship, however, Woolf also critiques Robert Browning's patriarchal control, especially in relation to Flush's kidnapping. In the 1931 draft, Woolf concentrates on Robert Browning's commandeering attempts to derail Flush's rescue: she writes that Barrett Browning "was ready to give money and time and attention to the one object of getting Flush back. But another lover was in conflict with her, which might prove harder to deal with than the brute force of Taylor's minions and their hags" ("Chapter Two" 70). Despite Robert Browning's determination to prevent Flush's rescue, Woolf stresses that Barrett Browning refused to abandon her pursuit and "wrote appealing with confidence to her lover for sympathy," further elaborating that "this was a case – perhaps the only… in all their lives – when Miss Barrett and Robert Browning did not see eye to eye together" ("Chapter Two" 71). By deconstructing their mythologized Victorian partnership, Woolf counters previous narratives that glorify Barrett Browning's reliance on

her husband. Furthermore, Woolf emphasizes that the poet was capable of courageously defending her actions, despite the opposition of her lover.

After Barrett Browning appeals to Robert Browning for sympathy, Woolf intersperses her depiction of their romance with feminist commentary. Woolf ascertains that "such an expression… of reason, in…a difficult woman, who, it must be added, was still without her dog…might have made… his loving heart start to give way" ("Chapter Two" 72). Woolf's ironic use of the phrase "difficult woman" suggests that the men in her life view her retrieval of Flush as stubborn and unladylike. Moreover, Woolf stresses Barrett Browning's agency within the misogyny surrounding her, explaining that "many an invalid in the forties would have said after all my duty as a woman, soon to be a wife, is submission. In these matters, men are our masters" ("Chapter Two" 72). After this observation, Woolf pauses from her narrative to wryly remark "far from it" ("Chapter Two" 72). By transforming an oppressive situation into a moment of growth, Woolf champions Barrett Browning's confrontation with Robert Browning. Furthermore, by imagining the unfulfilled potential of Barrett Browning's life, Woolf views Barrett Browning through an unabashedly feminist lens. Thus, after venturing into Whitechapel to retrieve Flush against Robert Browning's wishes, Woolf writes that "had she been a man, had she been even a strong woman with a little money of her own, how she would have loved to take her share in rebuilding those slums" ("Chapter Two" 78). Woolf not only depicts Barrett Browning as a feminist, but she also abandons the idealization of the courtship by exposing the flaws in their relationship.

Despite this compelling portrayal of Barrett Browning's autonomy in the 1931 draft, Woolf was disappointed with the finished product, and removed some of her feminist observations during the revisions process. On December 23rd, 1931, she approached the conclusion of the first draft of *Flush,* and she expressed this enduring dissatisfaction in her diary, writing that "I must write off my dejected rambling misery – having just read over the

30,000 words of Flush & come to the conclusion that they won't do. Oh what a waste…. Four months of work, & heaven knows how much reading …& I can't see how to make anything of it" (4: 134). Woolf's discontent perhaps arises from the disjointed, fragmentary nature of her first draft, and it would prompt her movement toward a Flush-focused, autobiografictional mode. This excerpt not only emphasizes the voluminous body of biographical information that Woolf compiled for the writing of *Flush*, but it also suggests that the 1931 draft overuses historical fact. As Woolf explains, "it's not the right subject for that length: it's too slight & too serious. Much food in it but would have to be much better…I can't get back into Flush, ever, I feel" (4: 134). Whereas "too slight" suggests that *Flush* is either not long enough or lacking substance, "too serious" implies that her novel relies too heavily on the granite-like substance of the biographical tradition. Although Woolf recognizes that there is "much food in it," she acknowledges that her first draft occupies a liminal space between an insubstantial, light-hearted narrative and a serious biography. In an attempt to remedy these flaws and emphasize the accuracy of Barrett Browning's depiction, Woolf drafted a concluding essay that justified her research materials.

In the published version, Woolf sought to affirm the reliability of her sources by directing "the reader who would like to check the facts or to pursue the subject further" (107) to a list of only eight "Authorities" for the book. While the final version merely specifies Woolf's authorities, the 1931 draft is accompanied by an essay in which Woolf elaborates on her engagement with her source material. In the Shakespeare Head Press edition of *Flush,* Elizabeth Steele transcribes this essay, speculating that "this light-hearted manuscript… [was] originally planned to precede Woolf's list of sources in *Flush*" (100) as an explanatory note justifying Woolf's selection of research materials. Written on July 31st, 1931, only ten days after she had begun the first draft of *Flush,* Woolf's "Authorities" essay participates in a multifaceted dialogue with her source material, underscoring her role as a female biographer,

and ultimately, revealing her original intentions for the 1931 draft. She expresses the difficulties of representing historical figures in her writing, explaining that "Mr & Mrs Browning are authentic people. Every effort has been made to respect this authenticity. Mr & Mrs Browning both wrote & spoke, & therefore every effort has been made to respect their words" (qtd. in Steele 101). By emphasizing that her subject was an "authentic" person who "wrote & spoke," Woolf emphasizes the value of thorough biographical research and affirms that she carefully consulted her sources. Subsequently, Woolf affirms the truthfulness of her narrative by explaining that "there are only three departures from that accuracy. Three times Miss Barrett is made to exclaim Oh Flush: once Mr Browning. No words are put into Mr Browning's mouth than those that he actually spoke" (qtd. in Steele 101). In contrast to the published text, in which Woolf loosely quotes from the letters without citations and repeatedly speculates the thoughts and feelings of historical figures, the 1931 draft contains only three instances where Woolf alters history to accommodate her narrative.

Although material from Woolf's previous writings on the Brownings appears in the drafted text, Woolf does not acknowledge these numerous reviews and essays in her "Authorities" or in her reading notes. In the months preceding the first draft of *Flush,* Woolf composed her "Aurora Leigh" essay for the *Second Common Reader* series, and her bewilderment with the cultural amnesia surrounding Barrett Browning prompted a continuation of her recovery project. While indications of this influence are absent in *Flush*, Woolf does reference *Aurora Leigh* once*,* writing in the 1931 draft that Barrett Browning was deeply affected by her encounters in Whitechapel and "wrote fast and furiously, with passion, ardour, something of the eagerness and brilliance that must be released at last, the same in *Aurora Leigh*" ("Chapter Two" 75). In the published version, Woolf shortens this passage to note that Barrett Browning's misadventures in Whitechapel would "inspire the most vivid passages in *Aurora Leigh*" (64). However, in the corresponding endnote to this passage,

Woolf addresses the "readers of *Aurora Leigh*" at length, clarifying that "since such persons are non-existent it must be explained that Mrs Browning wrote a poem of this name, one of the most vivid passages in which…is the description of a London slum" (109). Woolf's declaration in *Flush* that readers of *Aurora Leigh* are "non-existent" echoes her declaration in her "Aurora Leigh" essay that "nobody reads [Barrett Browning], nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place" (202). Furthermore, notes on *Aurora Leigh* in preparation for *Flush* or the "Aurora Leigh" essay are not only absent from the reading notebook collection, but Woolf never cites *Aurora Leigh* as one of her "Authorities." Whether this omission is an error or a deliberate exclusion is undeterminable, but the absence of *Aurora Leigh* arguably exposes her desire to separate the elusive artist from her poetic output. Instead of citing all of Barrett Browning's works as sources, Woolf lists a select few poems and five letter collections from the Brownings and Miss Mitford. When Woolf does cite Barrett Browning's poetry in the published version of the "Authorities," she lists Barrett Browning's two poems about Flush*,* "To Flush, My Dog*,*" and "Flush or Faunus*,*" and this unusual choice to select only two poems as sources for the biography indicates her reliance on letters to interpret Barrett Browning's life.

Although Woolf's drafted "Authorities" section indicates that *Flush'*s focus would eventually shift from the poet to her dog, her initial concern is to respectfully represent the human lives in *Flush*. In the "Authorities," Woolf reveals her frustration with conveying the complexity of life experiences; she speculates that "if Flush could speak, let alone write, it may be said, he would contradict, indeed repudiate, many of the opinions attributed to him in the text" (qtd. in Steele 100). Woolf further mollifies her reader's expectations with the disclaimer that "for the biographer…to assume that he can trace every shade of Flush's feelings, as he lay in Miss Barrett's room…would need more audacity than for him to assume an equal knowledge of Miss Barrett's feelings" ("Chapter Two" 79). Steele argues that

Woolf's early refusal to laud the accuracy of *Flush* mitigates her readership's expectations and anticipates possible complaints, despite her consistent reliance on biographical materials; thus, "her notebook reveals that every one of the dog's basic circumstances is derived from – albeit, sometimes condensed – on-the-scene reports" (xix). Woolf contends with the impossibility of representing any life, even a cocker spaniel's, and she writes in her "Authorities" that "two considerations have had weight with us in attempting a difficult, nay an impossible, perhaps an altogether improper task. The first is simply, that since lives have to be written, *every* life must be distorted" (qtd. in Steele 100). With this acknowledgment, Woolf addresses the adversity of the 1931 draft and indicates that with the onset of modernism, the role of the biographer shifted. She continues in a humorous tone, writing that "clearly the time is coming… [when] there will be no more lives to write. The supply of gentlemen and ladies who were authentic cousins of Carlyle's cook will give out. Then who will remain to write about?" (qtd. in Steele 100). Indeed, just as the "authentic cousins of Carlyle's cook" are menial, inconsequential figures with obscure stories, Flush is an unconventional biographical subject with an untold life narrative. Thus, Woolf abandoned the "Authorities" essay in the second draft of the novel as she began to focus on Flush's subjectivity, and this sudden shift was chiefly caused by Lytton Strachey's death.

When Strachey died in January of 1932, Woolf's conventional tone shifted, and she no longer wanted to portray human life through Strachey's biographical strategy. In a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, she claims that with *Flush,* she "wanted to play a joke on Lytton – it was to parody him. But then it grew too long" (5:162). Following Strachey's death, Woolf's problems with "that silly book Flush" (4:153) continued to grow as she revised her original draft and distanced herself from Strachey's biographical mode; she tried "to re-write that abominable dog Flush in 13 days, so as to be free" (4:139) and was "so glad to be quit of page 100 of Flush – this is the third time of writing that Whitechapel scene, & I doubt if its

worth it" (4:142). Although the majority of the first five chapters were revised in the second draft, one of the most significant revisions is her alteration of the narrative's conclusion. In a letter from October of 1933, Woolf explains that "the last paragraph as originally written was simply Queen Victoria dying all over again –Flush remembered his entire past in Lyttons best manner; but I cut it out, when he was not there to see the joke" (5: 232). Similar to the funereal conclusions of Strachey's four biographical portraits in *Eminent Victorians*, Woolf's 1931 draft ends on a melancholy note with the resting place of each historical figure. After an abstract recollection of Flush's past, noticeably disjointed from the rest of the 1931 draft, Woolf promptly returns to the biographical tradition by describing the resting places of her subjects: she writes, "Robert Browning was buried in Westminster Abbey. Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a church in Florence. Flush in the vaults beneath the Casa Guidi" ("Chapter Two" 161). In the published version, Woolf relegates the deaths of her subjects to an endnote and switches the ordering to prioritize Barrett Browning, stating that "Mrs Browning was buried in the English Cemetery at Florence, Robert Browning in Westminster Abbey. Flush still lies, therefore, beneath the house in which, once upon a time, the Brownings lived" (115). Woolf's reliance on the Brownings' correspondence, her metatextual commentary on her authorities, and her emphasis on historical facts nearly vanished as she edited her writing. Although some structural elements would remain the same between revisions, Woolf completely reimagined her biographical project between 1931 and 1932 to accommodate her autobiografictional mode.

Despite the extensive revisions between the first draft of *Flush* and the published version, Woolf's emphasis on historical representation remained a constant, especially in her correspondence with acquaintances and the reading public. On October 8th, 1933, Woolf defended the historical context of *Flush* in a letter to David Garnett, writing that "I had meant to write and thank you before, but not being altogether a dog, as you justly observe,

had no time to go to the London Library and prove that I'm not so inaccurate as you think. No. I am rather proud of my facts" (5: 231). While this letter immediately follows the publication of *Flush*, Woolf's preoccupation with representing the misunderstood female subject lingered long after the 1931 draft was revised. Claire Battershill emphasizes Woolf's attentiveness to the historicity of her subject, highlighting a 1934 letter in response to a disgruntled reader who was dissatisfied with Woolf's representation of the facts: she writes, "I am sorry that I was inaccurate about the detail of the window blind…I hope the matter is not of sufficient importance to require alteration" (qtd. in Battershill 107). Although the original letter, written by a woman identified in Woolf's response as "Miss Batchelder," no longer exists in its original form, Battershill posits that this brief exchange demonstrates Woolf's fixation with properly representing Barrett Browning, and the ensuing consequences if she strayed too far from the truth. Battershill writes that "while focalization through a dog's perspective was, in this particular reader's view, allowable, historical inaccuracies about window coverings and Barrett Browning's preferred kinds of cake were not forgivable liberties" (107). Even though Woolf distances herself from biographical accuracy in the final version of *Flush*, readers such as Miss Batchelder searched for errors, and moreover, expected factual correctness from the author, even though Flush was altogether incapable of formulating his own subjectivity.

Many years later, in "The Art of Biography" (1939), Woolf encapsulated the difficulties of *Flush*'s drafting process by describing biographical writing as a perilous venture into the unknown: she writes that "the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe" (186). While she may have already "tested the atmosphere" by reviewing Lubbock's biographical work in 1906 and writing "Aurora Leigh" in 1931, Woolf occupied the position of "miner's canary" in the early

draft of *Flush* by testing her "sense of truth" through a conventional form, and furthermore, by interrogating the misogynist biographical practices that attempted to expunge Barrett Browning's story from the historical record. Although Woolf's shift from the biography of a woman and her dog to a mostly canine-centric narrative might appear to derail her feminist recovery project, the published version of *Flush* further demonstrates Woolf's determination to share Barrett Browning's extraordinary life narrative. By aligning her anxieties about her own authorial reputation with Barrett Browning's neglected history, the revised version of *Flush* synthesizes Woolf's lived experiences with Barrett Browning's historical past, and in the process, employs an autobiografictional mode that ultimately unites the Victorian and the modern.

CHAPTER THREE:

"I MUST NOT SETTLE INTO A FIGURE": AUTOBIOGRAFICTION, LITERARY REPUTATION, AND THE WOMAN WRITER IN *FLUSH*

After rescuing the neglected female artist from the servants' quarters in "Aurora Leigh" and recovering Barrett Browning's biography in the 1931 draft of *Flush,* Woolf's feminist project transformed into the 1933 version of *Flush: A Biography.* While early drafts of *Flush* chronicle Barrett Browning's forgotten history through conventional narration, the published version deconstructs the biographical genre by blending an omniscient narrator's observations with both Barrett Browning and Flush's perspectives. In her 1939 essay "The Art of Biography," written six years after the publication of *Flush,* Woolf criticizes the extravagant ceremony of Victorian biography, writing that most Victorian biographies resemble "the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street – effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin" (182). By vividly imparting Barrett Browning's history through her modernist mode, Woolf refuses to create a superficial effigy of the poet. Instead of relying upon historical fact, Woolf departs from the monument of nineteenth-century biography by further destabilizing the boundaries between fact and fiction and conceiving a modernist hybrid of genres.

To interpret Woolf's narrative methodology in *Flush*, this chapter adopts Max Saunders' conceptualization of "autobiografiction" in *Self-Impression, Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature,* in which he posits that "autobiography and fiction…are profoundly interdependent, and constitute throughout the last two centuries a system of modern self-representation" (21). Through her autobiografictional mode, Woolf not only recovers the forgotten female poet and her dog, but she also infuses Barrett Browning's story with elements of her own life narrative. As

Christine Reynier theorizes, "the history of a life is transmuted into the mapping of the self" (189) in *Flush*, and this process encompasses the "ideological and the biographical, the fictional and the metafictional…the polysemous biographical text…expand[s] into an aesthetic autobiography" (189). Instead of solely focusing on Barrett Browning, Woolf explores their shared Victorian heritage and status as literary women suffering from illness, the influence of their tyrannical fathers, and their difficulties pursuing education. Woolf revises biographical convention by appealing to fiction and introspection, and as Saunders explains, her radical approach to life narratives demonstrates that "modernism constantly engages with [life writing] dialectically, rejecting it in order to assimilate and transform it" (22). By applying Saunders' conceptualization of "autobiografiction" to *Flush* and discussing how this literary mode reveals the author's intimate connection to her subjects, this chapter will consider how Woolf participates in a modernist reconstruction of Victorian life that critiques the patriarchy, dismantles a biographical tradition that overlooks Barrett Browning's history, and fuses her own life narrative with the marginalized perspectives of the past.

Although Woolf was determined to recover Barrett Browning's history through *Flush*, writing this narrative forced Woolf to confront the spectre of her own biographical immortalization. Woolf worried that *Flush*'s uncharacteristically humorous style could affect her literary reputation and thus her future biographical depictions. A diary entry from October 2nd, 1933 reveals that Woolf was "very much depressed" (4: 181) by the possibility of *Flush*'s success: "they'll say it's 'charming' delicate, ladylike. And it will be popular…I must not let myself believe that I'm simply a ladylike prattler…I shall very much dislike the popular success of Flush" (4: 181). This fear of becoming a "ladylike prattler" did not, however, prevent Woolf from pursuing her project with an unparalleled fervour. As Saunders says, while *Flush* was inspired by Woolf's concerns about her reputation, Woolf's "biographical fantasy fictions… originate in auto/biografiction, seeking to pre-empt her own

crystallization as a biographical subject" (449). Woolf cannot fully anticipate future portrayals of herself, but her infusion of *Flush* with autobiographical elements seeks to pre-empt these representations and exhibit some control over her authorial fate. Woolf's concern for her biographical representation was not unwarranted: in the early 1930s, Winifred Holtby began the first biography of Woolf (*Diary* 4: 13), while in 1932, Donald Brace asked E.M. Forster and Harold Nicolson if they would be interested in writing Woolf's biography.[5] Much of Woolf's oeuvre is imbued with her concern that future biographers might preserve her image in a false or misunderstood light. As Battershill suggests, her fear about being "monumentalized or turned into a Victorian waxwork, as she thought that Barrett Browning had been, reflects her view…that several versions of the same life must be considered in order even to approach an understanding of a biographical subject" (101). In her diary, Woolf professed her fear of suffering a similar fate to Barrett Browning, writing that "two books on Virginia Woolf have just appeared…This is a danger signal. I must not settle into a figure" (4: 85). *Flush* is, in part, her response to this impending historical figuration. By looking at both her own life and the waxwork-like representations of Barrett Browning's life, Woolf recognizes that female life writing must incorporate multiple perspectives in order to avoid the stiffness of the Victorian biographical tradition. Thus, Woolf gradually accepts her fate as a biographical subject through *Flush*.

In *Flush,* Woolf allows the writing self to emerge in the spaces between modernist fiction and biography, and this multifaceted unveiling of the author's inner life is the nexus of her life writing practice. To resist the more conventional biographical principles of her earlier drafts, accommodate the autobiographical self, and undermine the assumption that her role as author is definitive, Woolf names her protagonist "Miss Barrett" instead of referring to her as Barrett Browning. Subsequently, Miss Barrett transforms into a fusion of history and fiction,

[5] See "Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf's *Flush*" by Anna Snaith for more information on biographies written on Woolf during *Flush*'s conception.

a mediator between the Victorian waxworks of the past and the unstable protagonists of a modernist present. As Saunders posits, Woolf alters her depiction of Barrett Browning because she develops a "turn-of-the-century awareness that the conventions of biography (like history) are…absurd: that as soon as they…become visible *as* conventions, they can no longer do their work of transparently creating the impression of authority and objectivity" (450). By situating herself in the liminal space between biography, autobiography, and fiction, Woolf deconstructs the biographical genre through the inclusion of her own authorial voice alongside the voice of a neglected historical woman. Underlying this evolving synergy between Miss Barrett and her authorial counterpart is the presence of Flush himself, a dog who embodies Woolf's experimental modernity by participating in her omniscient narration. Although Flush's character is based on a historical figure, his consciousness is one of the most fictive elements of the novel; Woolf imagines his thoughts, feelings, and desires, and situates them alongside her own perspective as narrator. Whereas the 1931 draft of *Flush* linearly imparts Barrett Browning's biography, the published version chronicles both Flush's and Barrett Browning's lives, starting with Flush's early memories at Three Mile Cross with Miss Mitford and his relocation to Barrett Browning's back bedroom, and ending with the Brownings' elopement to Italy and Flush's death.

Much of the existing scholarship on *Flush* focuses on Flush's non-human subjectivity and how theories of the posthuman apply to this text. As David Herman explains, viewing *Flush* from a zoological perspective involves an engagement with a "wider ecology of minds" (558) that accounts for "intersecting cognitive ecosystems – with stories providing means for mapping out relationships" (560) between human and non-human beings. Along with Herman's ecological perspective, Karalyn Kendall-Morwick, Jutta Ittner, Craig Smith, and Dan Wylie provide fascinating studies of canine subjectivity in Woolf's writing. While these scholars view Woolf's exploration of Flush's subjectivity as a subversive attempt to

imbue her modernity with interspecies perspectives, this chapter will argue that Flush is an anthropomorphic representation of both Woolf and Miss Barrett's marginalization. Consequently, Flush's subjectivity allows the author not only to comment on the difficulties of life as a woman writer, but also to recover Barrett Browning's neglected history from his perspective. Thus, before addressing the various manifestations of Woolf's autobiographical presence in the narrative, it is necessary to illuminate the connection between Miss Barrett as woman writer and Flush as a representation of her marginalization.

Flush is Miss Barrett's companion in confinement and a surrogate for the canines that accompanied Woolf during her own confinement in Hyde Park Gate; he is both a historical dog that played an integral role in Barrett Browning's life, and a dog with an effusive, human-like subjectivity that originates in Woolf's imagination. Susan Squier, one of the only scholars to interpret Flush as a representative of the woman writer, emphasizes Woolf's emblematic connection between women and dogs: "Flush operates as a stand-in for the woman writer," she writes, "for the woman poet who was his historical mistress; for the woman poet to whom Woolf's previous mock biography was dedicated; and for the woman writer who was his creator" (124). Following Flush's arrival at Wimpole Street, Woolf describes the curious resemblance between woman and canine, noting that "heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them" (18). Not only does a "likeness" unite woman and dog, but Woolf depicts them as two halves of the "same mould" (18), a statement that conveys the significance of their relationship. Moving beyond the physical similarities between Miss Barrett's "heavy curls" and Flush's "heavy ears," Woolf also describes the divide between species: she explains that Miss Barrett "spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other"

(19). Just as both historical and semi-fictional woman and dog are two halves of the "same mould," Woolf acknowledges her own role in recovering this relationship and invites the reader to gaze unabashedly at this strange profusion of mirror images.

Flush not only physically resembles his mistress, but his position as a house pet also parallels hers as a woman in Victorian patriarchy. In *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf articulates the connection between woman and dog by reproducing Samuel Johnson's infamous remark that "a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" (128). This historical equation of women to dogs underscores the relationship between Miss Barrett and Flush. Although women and dogs are companions in an oppressive Victorian world, their bond is cemented by misogyny, and this marginalization is what confines them to the back bedroom at Wimpole Street. To further emphasize the woman-as-dog metaphor, Miss Barrett imagines herself in Flush's helpless position: Woolf writes, "but what would Mr Browning have done if the banditti had stolen her; had *her* in their power; threatened to cut off *her* ears and send them by post to New Cross?" (original emphasis, 62). Both woman and dog struggle to negotiate with patriarchal power, and this oppression forces them to band together, so much so that Miss Barrett fleetingly assumes the role of a kidnapped canine. However, while Flush is unable to free himself from captivity, Miss Barrett exhibits her strength by rebelling against the wishes of her father, brothers, and lover, and journeying to Whitechapel to retrieve Flush. Squier posits that this rebellion epitomizes the woman-dog connection: she writes that if the "house pet acts as an endorsement of man's power to…dominate wild nature, so, too, the middle-class domestic woman in the parlor demonstrates the sexual and economic potency of the men around her through her clothing, her accomplishments, and her conspicuous leisure time (125). Not only do Flush and Miss Barrett physically resemble one another, but they also share similar social positions. However, only Miss Barrett can resist her subjugation and

save Flush from his captors. Instead of obeying the wishes of the men surrounding her and maintaining her image as Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," Miss Barrett boldly abandons the sickroom to save Flush from the dog-nappers. Thus, woman and dog truly are, as Woolf says, "closely united" and "immensely divided."

While the intimate relationship between Miss Barrett and Flush is at the forefront of Woolf's narrative, there are subtler connections between *Flush*'s themes and Woolf's experiences as both a dog owner and woman writer. Woolf relied on numerous canine companions, and many of them acted as emotional support animals during periods of mental instability. According to Maureen Adams, Woolf relied on dogs "to attract the attention of, and to express her feelings for, the people she loved…. Dogs…provid[ed] some sense of stability and consistency in a family that was undergoing chaos, uncertainty, and loss" (64). During Woolf's childhood, the Stephens had two dogs, Shag and Gurth, and although these animals were the sole canine companions of her childhood, she would later look to Grizzle, Pinker, the Carlyles' dog Nero, and many of Vita Sackville-West's dogs to inspire *Flush.* As Elizabeth Steele illuminates, there are a number of similarities between Woolf's obituary essay for Shag, "On a Faithful Friend" (1905) and *Flush*; she notes that "most impressive may be the parallels in structure and content…Like *Flush,* the essay begins by discussing Shag's 'noble' ancestry" (xvi). Similar to *Flush*'s melodramatic death at the end of the novel following a jaunt in the streets of Florence, "On a Faithful Friend" ends with Shag's death in the midst of London traffic, directly outside of the Stephen's house. Furthermore, in her obituary for Shag, Woolf poses a question that underlies much of her inquiry in *Flush,* asking "how have we the impertinence to make these wild creatures forgo their nature for ours, which at best they can but imitate?" (12). As Flush forgoes the muteness of his historical counterpart in order to voice the struggles of his oppressed mistress, Woolf unearths her personal connection with the canines of her past and addresses this distinctly human

impertinence to tame the non-human animal.

Woolf incorporates historical images to invoke the biographical components of *Flush,* but many of these visual elements also reveal the autobiographical undertones of the novel. Included are portraits of the Brownings and Miss Mitford, a map of Flush's birthplace, and four sketches drawn by Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, of Barrett Browning in the back bedroom, at Casa Guidi, and Miss Mitford taking Flush for a walk. While the sketches by Bell embody the interpretative nature of *Flush,* some of the photographs serve to illustrate the historical reality of her subjects. In the absence of a portrait of the historical Flush, Woolf turned to Vita Sackville-West, a close friend and lover, for "a photograph of Henry" (4: 380), Sackville-West's cocker spaniel. Writing with thanks, Woolf asked "may I keep it and perhaps use it in my story?" (5: 35). The photograph that appears as the frontispiece of *Flush*, however, is of Woolf's own cocker spaniel, a dog named Pinker or "Pinka." Steele speculates that Woolf's initial desire to include a photograph of Henry "stemmed from the thought that only a male dog's picture should illustrate a male dog's life…but in the end, observation, common sense and perhaps family pride prevailed. Pinker was photographed, on what appears to be Virginia Woolf's bed" (xvii). While Steele attributes the choice of Pinker over Henry to "common sense" and "family pride," the frontispiece also reveals Woolf's desire to infuse her narrative with autobiography. Pinker allows Woolf to familiarize herself with the behaviour of Flush's species, and in effect, transforms into Flush himself through his inclusion as the frontispiece.

Pinker's photographic transformation into Flush is intertwined with the empowered female friendships initiating this exchange. Just as Barrett Browning was given Flush by Mitford, so Woolf received Pinker as a gift from Sackville-West, in 1926. Sackville-West and Woolf discussed their canine companions at length in their correspondence, and Woolf occasionally associated Vita with Pinker: "please Vita dear don't forget your humble

creatures – Pinker and Virginia," Woolf wrote, "Every morning she jumps on to my bed and kisses me, and I say 'that's Vita'" (3:331). By displacing her affection for Sackville-West, Woolf and her lover become "humble creatures" alongside Pinker. Correspondence between Mitford and Barrett Browning also focuses on their canine companions, further consolidating the kinship between Victorian women and their dogs; as Kevin Morrison notes, "a large percentage of Barrett and Mitford's correspondence, much to the bemusement…of critics and biographers alike, is devoted to the cocker spaniel's various exploits" (98). While Woolf does not explain the autobiographical origins of *Flush*'s approach to dogs and friendship, the novel is infused with her firsthand experiences as the recipient of both Sackville-West and Pinker's affection, much like Miss Mitford and Miss Barrett's blossoming relationship at the beginning of *Flush*. The gift of Flush from one woman to another symbolizes the strength of female intimacy among patriarchal structures; as Woolf explains, Flush "was of the rare order of objects that cannot be associated with money. Was he not of the still rare kind that, because they typify…what is beyond price, become a fitting token…of friendship; may be offered in that spirit to a friend…who is more like a daughter than a friend[?]" (13). Sackville-West and Mitford view Pinker and Flush as tokens of friendship and extended companionship, and although these women could not always support their mentally and physically afflicted friends, Pinker and Flush act as surrogates for their powerful feminine love.

Mitford initially gave Flush to Barrett Browning as a remedy for the poet's loneliness, but also as a consolatory gift after her brother Edward died. Woolf does not explicitly discuss the circumstances that prompted this exchange; rather, she focuses instead on how Flush's history is intertwined with that of his former mistress at Three Mile Cross, elaborating that Miss Mitford "was much confined to the cottage. She had to read aloud to her father hour after hour…then, when at last he slumbered, to write and write and write…to pay their bills

and settle their debts" (10). Miss Mitford's difficult life as both a caregiver and writer are situated alongside Flush's early life at Three Mile Cross; thus, Flush is a witness to Miss Mitford's strenuous efforts to clear debts and assist her ailing father. Similarly, when Flush is later given to Barrett Browning as reprieve from her sequestered lifestyle as an invalid and writer, he witnesses the oppressive system that restricts her freedoms. Morrison elucidates the meaning of Mitford's gift, explaining that the emotional connection between Miss Mitford and Miss Barrett is "transacted through Flush. The unorthodox intimacy and kinship between women of different generations is displaced onto the equally unorthodox relationship they have to their respective cocker spaniels" (95). The tenderness between Miss Mitford, Miss Barrett, and Flush is diametrically opposed to the villainous behaviour of Mr. Taylor and his henchmen in Whitechapel, where Flush is instead treated as a formal object of exchange because of his breed. As Payal Taneja posits, the gift-giving practices between women act as a "counterpoint to male-centric modes of commodity exchange…modes that…are motivated primarily by pecuniary interests to the detriment of spiritual and communal values…upheld by the female friends" (131). Motivated by her own experience as the recipient of Pinker, Woolf portrays the exchange of dogs between women as a subversive, empowering act that counteracts male-centric commodity by celebrating the intimacy of platonic and romantic female friendships. Moreover, while the female invalid is sequestered in the sickroom, a canine companion acts as a source of comfort and stability.

Although Woolf endured episodes of mental instability and relied upon her canine companions for reprieve from these symptoms, she seldom refers to these struggles directly. Even in her 1926 essay, "On Being Ill," Woolf adopts an impersonal perspective in order to veil her experiences, lamenting that it is "strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (317). Arguably, Woolf's placement of illness at the forefront of Barrett Browning's narrative is an attempt to

remedy this absence. This impersonal perspective unfolds in *Flush* as Woolf's experiences with illness are seamlessly melded with Miss Barrett's. While private life writing in letters and diaries encouraged women like Woolf to confidentially discuss their tribulations with illness, writing *Flush* allowed Woolf to conceal herself behind another female writer while publicly contending with her history as a woman in the sickroom. As Janine Utell writes, female writers such as Barrett Browning "resonated with Woolf…and we can read them backwards through Woolf as she takes them on as interlocutors" (29). By viewing Barrett Browning as an interlocutor while focalizing Flush's perspective, Woolf indirectly confronts her personal struggles, infusing *Flush* with pathographic undertones. In chapter two of *Flush,* titled "The Back Bedroom," Woolf reiterates the "bird in a cage" metaphor to stress Miss Barrett's oppressive confinement; she writes that Miss Barrett "could not go out. She was chained to the sofa. 'A bird in a cage would have as good a story,' she wrote, as she had" (26); and "Miss Barrett's life was the life of 'a bird in its cage.' She sometimes kept the house for weeks at a time" (33). With these passages, Flush becomes an integral part of Miss Barrett's confinement, as much a bird in a cage as Miss Barrett herself. The unnaturalness of Flush's exile from the outside world emphasizes the injustice of her isolation; even though for Flush, "the whole world was free" (26), he must faithfully maintain his position by the invalid's side.

When Woolf describes Flush's position in the sickroom, she situates a dog that revelled in the "strong smells of earth, sweet smells of flowers, nameless smells of leaf and bramble" (11) in the dark chambers of the Wimpole Street bedroom. This jarring movement from freedom in the lavish fields at Three Mile Cross to the isolation of Wimpole Street figures illness as a detrimental and disorderly presence. Woolf's venture into the poet's sickroom is marked by language that juxtaposes her previous discussions of Three Mile Cross as opulent and fresh; she writes that

> Only a scholar who has descended step by step into a mausoleum and there finds himself in a crypt, crusted with fungus, slimy with mould, exuding sour smells of decay and antiquity …only the sensations of such an explorer into the buried vaults of a ruined city can compare with the riot of emotions that flooded Flush's nerves as he stood for the first time in an invalid's bedroom. (16)

By connecting Miss Barrett's sickroom to a decaying mausoleum, Woolf critiques the poet's seclusion on Wimpole Street and her consequent disengagement from the social world. While Miss Barrett, the historical Barrett Browning, and Woolf are subject to the alienating solitude of illness, the sickroom is foreign to young Flush; only he can recognize the decrepitude of the back bedroom, as it interrupts the normalcy of a dog's life. Depicting Flush as an "explorer" that clutches a "small swinging lamp" (16) as he descends into Miss Barrett's "crypt" underscores the antiquated ideologies that force sick women into their bedrooms and criticizes the values of the tyrannical father that enforce this isolation. Curiously, the mausoleum passage is anomalous; usually, Flush's observations are only slightly imbued with human philosophy, and instead, rely on sensory perceptions to emphasize his canine-oriented perspective. To illustrate the debilitating experience of illness, Woolf omnisciently blends her own perspective with Flush's to convey the shock and confusion that arises from entering the sickroom. Thus, through Flush's foreign experiences in the invalid's back bedroom, Woolf criticizes the systemic gulf between ill women and the outside world.

Despite her position as a marginalized invalid, Miss Barrett persists in writing about her experiences, just as Woolf does; as Utell explains, "writing renders a transgressive space beyond the 'normal' rhythms of life in which to work through a subject's altered relation to her mind and body…writing can be restorative for a subject grappling with how she has been othered" (29). Both women must transgress the constraints of a failing body in order to pen their experiences, and in effect, validate their struggles and restore their sense of self. The

pathographic interplay between Woolf and Barrett Browning as ill women who regain autonomy through the written word underscores *Flush*; they are, as Barrett Browning says, birds in cages that suffer from the limitations of confinement. However, instead of merely lamenting their struggles, both women choose to share their stories through autobiografictional and poetic mediums. To emphasize the woman writer's reliance on writing as escape, Woolf depicts the moment that Barrett Browning finds inspiration for her poem, "Flush or Faunus," writing that Miss Barrett questions if she "was no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek nymph in some dim grove in Arcady....For a moment she was transformed; she was a nymph and Flush was pan" (27). In the poem, Barrett Browning describes Flush as a "bearded vision" (11) with a "head as hairy as Faunus" (5), comforting her and allowing her to rise "above / Surprise and sadness" (13-14), and she escapes to an imaginary locale where, as Woolf describes, "the sun burnt and love blazed" (27). Despite the vividness of Flush's depiction as Faunus, Woolf admits that escape through writing does not eliminate a female writer's alienation, writing that "truth compels us to say that in the year 1842-43 Miss Barrett was not a nymph but an invalid; Flush was not a poet but a red cocker spaniel; and Wimpole Street was not Arcady but Wimpole Street" (28). Finding reprieve from isolation through writing is only temporary, but these stolen moments of liberation are a survival mechanism for the marginalized female writer.

Writing the female self is intertwined with education in *Flush,* and Woolf sees Barrett Browning's biography as an opportunity to criticize the restrictive practices of nineteenth-century female schooling. Woolf's discussion of Barrett Browning's education demonstrates her discontent with the oppression of both Victorian women and women like herself, restricted from attending school and left to seek knowledge independently in her father's library. As a woman raised at the conclusion of the Victorian era, Woolf was excluded from formal education and faced many of the same restrictions as Barrett Browning. As Hermione

Lee discusses, while the male Stephen family members left for work or in pursuit of a college education, "the daughters' days were split in half. There was the life that was thrust upon them of female duties and the life they wanted to make for themselves, of independent habits and passionate absorption in books and art" (141). Despite the limitations of a house-bound education, Woolf pursued her schooling with passion and ardour; Lee adds that Woolf "took refuge in her secret life in the 'daytime' half of her room, where she studied Greek, and read and wrote, standing up at her high desk" (142). The bedrooms at Hyde Park Gate and Wimpole Street became the nexus of both women's lives, and Woolf's careful depiction of Barrett Browning's life in isolation indicates her identification with the poet's struggles. To convey the totality of Miss Barrett's isolation from the outside world, Woolf writes that "Miss Barrett's bedroom…must by all accounts have been dark. The light, normally obscured by a curtain of green damask, was in summer further dimmed by the ivy, the scarlet runners, the convolvuluses and the nasturtiums which grew in the window-box" (16). Despite the abundance of natural life that spills out of the window-boxes, Miss Barrett is distanced from the outside world; she is limited from even seeing onto the street outside of her bedroom. Woolf continues to describe the backdrop to Miss Barrett's education, writing that "nothing could be seen in the room but the pale busts glimmering wanly on the tops of the wardrobes….Flush felt that he and Miss Barrett lived alone together in a cushioned and firelit cave" (24). This "cushioned and firelit cave" is eerily presided over by busts of Homer and Chaucer, male literary figures that perpetually oversee Miss Barrett's education and signify the patriarchal education system. Although Woolf initially emphasizes Miss Barrett's restrictive education through the stifled atmosphere of the back bedroom, she allows both herself and Miss Barrett to exercise autonomy through the teaching of Flush, a doting pupil that must learn the rules of the bedroom school.

When Flush is placed in Miss Barrett's care, he is disobedient and excitable, two

qualities that do not align with the orderly principles of the back bedroom school; as Woolf writes, "to resign, to control, to suppress the most violent instincts of his nature – that was the prime lesson of the bedroom school, and it was one of such portentous difficulty that many scholars have learned Greek with less" (25). As Miss Barrett begins to teach Flush, he refines his tastes to accommodate the isolation of himself and his mistress: Woolf describes Flush "lying with his head pillowed on a Greek lexicon" where "he came to dislike barking and biting; he came to prefer the silence of the cat to the robustness of the dog; and human sympathy to either. Miss Barrett, too, did her best to refine and educate his powers still further" (32). Not only does Flush develop an aversion toward his animal instincts, but Miss Barrett teaches him a phenomenological lesson in self-acknowledgment, a largely human capability that Woolf playfully assigns to her canine protagonist: Miss Barrett makes Flush "stand with her in front of the looking-glass and ask him why he barked and trembled. Was not the little brown dog opposite himself? But what is 'oneself'? Is it the thing people see? Or is it the thing one is?" (32). Looking in a mirror at oneself results in an epistemological crisis, and the lines between woman and dog are subsequently blurred.

Although both woman and dog receive a marginal and subpar education, Flush is still treated as an animal and is subject to discipline that reinforces his lowly position in the household hierarchy. Amidst a patriarchal system that restricts their autonomy, the only sphere that Woolf and Barrett Browning can control is the education and care of their pets. Woolf emphasizes that Miss Barrett finds strength in disciplining her pet; thus, after Flush's repeated attempts to prevent Robert Browning's infiltration of their back-bedroom sanctuary, Miss Barrett "called him to her and inflicted upon him the worst punishment he had ever known" and "slapped his ears….Then…said in her sober, certain tones, that she would never love him again" (43). It is not only Miss Barrett who disciplines Flush; Lily Wilson, her maid, is also severe with her punishments. As Taneja explains, both women "are painted as

Victorian viragoes who at times discipline and punish their canine companion. The disciplinarian role…helps us to rethink the image of 'The Angel in the House,' which Woolf unreservedly disliked" (135). Woolf critiques Wilson and Miss Barrett, suggesting that their treatment of Flush replicates the harsh treatment of the patriarchal figures confining them to the back bedroom. As long as Miss Barrett resides in London under patriarchal rule, Flush is treated as the women of the house are treated: he is punished for speaking up, for exhibiting too much intelligence, or simply for being seen. However, Woolf establishes that Flush is more perceptive than the average canine, clarifying that "such an education as this, in the back bedroom at Wimpole Street, would have told upon an ordinary dog. And Flush was not an ordinary dog" (32). Elizabeth Knauer explains this dichotomy between Flush as an equal and Flush as an underling, writing that the novel "stands midway between [Woolf's] earlier feminism of equality and her later feminism of difference," further explaining that "the fate of Flush…proves the argument in favor of better education through independence" (2). By melding the historical Flush with an amalgamation of dog and human, Woolf narrates his struggles to adapt to the back-bedroom school and critiques the limitations of a patriarchal education system.

Although Miss Barrett leaves Wimpole Street of her own accord, abandoning the back bedroom and seeking a worldly education is made possible through Robert Browning's courtship. Woolf recognizes that Miss Barrett's elopement gave her the opportunity to pursue her vocation fully, much as her own marriage to Leonard Woolf brought her creative freedom, and creative partnership, through the Hogarth Press. Through Flush's perspective, Woolf depicts Miss Barrett's gradual change from a docile, obedient invalid to an anxious and apprehensive woman, eager to abandon the back-bedroom: she describes the progression of Barrett Browning's courtship, writing that "as the envelopes came more and more regularly, night after night, Flush began to notice signs of change in Miss Barrett herself. For

the first time in Flush's experience she was irritable and restless…She stood at the window and looked out" (36). The possibility of freedom agitates Miss Barrett, and instead of viewing the back bedroom as the center of her world, she imagines breaking out of confinement. Woolf emphasizes the obviousness of the change in Miss Barrett, writing that "in spite of their astonishing blindness, even Miss Barrett's family began to notice…a change in Miss Barrett" (39), a change that is manifested in her readiness to "sit in the drawing room" and walk "on her own feet as far as the gate at Devonshire" (39). Eloping to Italy allows for not only the promise of real-world education, but Knauer also explains that Woolf presents Flush as a model of achievement for modern female readers, "encouraging them to be bold. If a dog can learn, travel, pursue pleasure, and teach the art of living, surely they can too" (16). While Edward Moulton-Barrett and Leslie Stephen force Barrett Browning and Woolf into confinement, the daughters ultimately pursue empowered creation through travel and self-cultivation. However, in order to relinquish her position as a sequestered invalid and flee to safety and freedom in Italy, Miss Barrett must apply her sparse back-bedroom education and confront the domineering presence of the father figure.

Although Flush and Miss Barrett live in a room on Wimpole Street, it is not a room of their own; the owner of the house is Edward Moulton-Barrett, "the most formidable of elderly men" (31), and his oppressive control of Miss Barrett's life closely resembles Woolf's tumultuous relationship with her father, Leslie Stephen. While an actual "room of one's own" is, as Anna Snaith describes, "silent, private…liberating, a place from which women can speak without restriction, and from which the variety of women's experience can be spoken" (*Public* 161-62), Miss Barrett's position under the watchful eye of her brothers and her father prevents her from possessing Woolf's coveted space. Miss Barrett, like Woolf, is restricted by her father's repressive Victorian morals, and must escape from this value system in order to become a fully realized artistic self. A dictatorial energy surrounded both the house at

Wimpole Street and Woolf's childhood home at 22 Hyde Park Gate, and the remarkable similarities between Barrett Browning's and Woolf's fathers surfaces throughout *Flush*. In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf attempts to reconcile with her traumatic past under the control of Leslie Stephen, describing him as "the tyrant father…the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred…the alternately loved and hated father" (116). In *Flush,* these qualities are similarly manifested in Edward Moulton-Barrett, but Flush observes the father's tyranny instead of Miss Barrett. To emphasize the "formidable" qualities of both Victorian patriarchs, Woolf's language in "A Sketch of the Past" recalls her descriptions in *Flush.* While the young Woolf is described as a "nervous, gibbering, little monkey" (116) in "A Sketch of the Past," Flush occupies a similar position of fearfulness, and "shivers of terror and horror ran down Flush's spine…as that dark body approached him" (31). Just as Woolf's father was a "pacing, dangerous, morose lion" (116), and his daughters subject to "the full blast of that strange character" (107), Miss Barrett and Flush endure Mr. Barrett's "obtuseness" and "self-absorption" (39) in the Wimpole Street house. Woolf allows Flush to articulate both his and his mistress's sense of powerlessness in the hands of the patriarch; as Flush observes, he felt as though "a force had entered the bedroom…that he was powerless to withstand" (31). Flush's powerlessness mirrors Woolf's helplessness under her father's tyranny. As Julia Briggs posits, *Flush* is one of Woolf's numerous attempts to revisit painful childhood memories and arrive at new conclusions from her adult perspective: "if Virginia re-created something of the atmosphere of her childhood, it was only to discover how suffocating and entrapping that world had been, and to re-enact her rejection of its values and make good her symbolic escape" (49). While in "A Sketch of the Past," this "symbolic escape" is epitomized by Leslie Stephen's death and Woolf's transformation into an autonomous female writer, she also escapes from her past alongside Miss Barrett and Flush as they flee to Italy, and her emotional connection to these two historical figures is

manifested through these subtle autobiographical infusions.

Whereas Miss Barrett hardly expresses any trepidation toward the father figure, Flush embodies her emotions, acting as an autobiografictional placeholder who experiences both Woolf's and Miss Barrett's emotions alongside his own. When Flush hears "a step that was heavier, more deliberate and firmer than any other…on the stair" and "a knock…that was no tap of enquiry but a demand for admittance; the door opened and in came the blackest, most formidable of elderly men – Mr Barrett himself" (30-31), Woolf establishes that the father figure is "formidable" to both humans and animals alike. However, the fact that this observation originates in the dog's consciousness instead of the daughter's is jarring. Woolf displaces Miss Barrett's thoughts by assigning them to her canine companion, and this strategy emphasizes her father's misogyny. As Christine Reynier confirms, Barrett Browning is "depicted mainly as the nonconformist, rebellious woman and as such, stands for the social and political self of the artist, while Flush embodies his/her cognitive powers" (199). By allowing Flush to possess the narrative's "cognitive powers," Woolf forces the reader to question the distinction between the authorial mind and the canine consciousness. Thus, Woolf's experiences as the daughter of a tyrannical father seamlessly blend with Flush's perspective. By occupying this liminal space between dog, author, and historical subject, Woolf captures the brutal psychological impact of both her own and Barrett Browning's experiences as daughters of totalitarian fathers. Woolf observes in a November 1928 diary entry that if her father had continued to live, "his life would have entirely ended mine…No writing, no books;—inconceivable" (3: 208), and in *Flush,* she similarly views the patriarchal Victorian father as an obstruction to the cultivation of female life. In order to pursue her art, either the father must die, or the daughter must remove herself from the household. In the rare instance where Miss Barrett's thoughts are expressed without Flush's assistance or passages from the letters, the narrator confirms Miss Barrett's relief after escaping Wimpole

Street, writing that "fear was unknown in Florence; there were no dog-stealers here and, she may have sighed, there were no fathers" (78). While Florence ultimately provides reprieve from London's oppressive patriarchy, Miss Barrett, Woolf, and Flush must first contend with both "dog-stealers" and "fathers" in the liminal space between Whitechapel and Wimpole Street, where Flush is not only stolen from Miss Barrett, but their privileged perceptions of Victorian society are also challenged.

Although Woolf was familiar with the class divisions of Victorian-era London, her knowledge was anecdotal. As Lisbeth Larsson explains, the central area of London was levelled at the end of the century to make room for modern centres, and "the abysmal slums that had existed in central and north-east London…had to some extent disappeared and Woolf's knowledge of them was in principle historic" (161). Woolf largely relied upon Thomas Beames' *The Rookeries of London* and Charles Booth's "Poverty Maps" of London to conceptualize the geographical spaces of Barrett Browning's and Flush's lives. Woolf also visited Wimpole Street, describing her visit "to a Wimpole Street specialist – happily his house was almost opposite Flush's so that I could count the storeys & verify the knockers – its true they have none, but the houses are very well pointed" (4: 143-4). While Woolf studied the politics of Barrett Browning's Victorian London in preparation for *Flush,* her physical visitation to Wimpole Street signifies the role of geography in Woolf's creative process. By studying London's history and visiting Barrett Browning's neighbourhood, Woolf acknowledges the class divisions of Barrett Browning's time and prophetically foretells the future of London's slums. While Miss Barrett initially embarks upon short excursions in London with her sister Arabella, her travel is rarely by foot; thus, Woolf marks Miss Barrett's transformation from an oppressed invalid to a developed woman artist by slowly introducing her to foot travel, starting with her small walks within London to "the gates of Devonshire" (39) and concluding with her freedom in the streets of Florence. As

Julia Briggs explains, for Woolf, "the constraints on her freedom to walk where she wanted would be linked with the constraints on writing as she wanted" (277); just as Woolf feels artistically unconstrained because she can freely wander London's streets, Miss Barrett's freedom to express herself, both in her life and in her poetry, grows as she roams further away from Wimpole Street.

To convey the monumental presence of the Barrett's residence, Woolf incorporates her observations of twentieth-century Wimpole Street into *Flush* by drawing her reader into the present, writing that "even *now* perhaps nobody rings the bell of a house in Wimpole Street without trepidation" (italics mine, 13-14):

> when the world seems tumbling to ruin, and civilization rocks on its foundations, one has only to go to Wimpole Street…to survey those houses; to consider their uniformity… to admire the brass knockers and their regularity…in order to heave a sigh of thankfulness that…while crowns have blown down the wind and old Empires have gone up in flames, Wimpole Street has remained unmoved…for as long as Wimpole Street remains, civilization is secure. (13-14)

In the ensuing paragraphs, Woolf juxtaposes her present with the historical past through descriptions of the street, writing that "the butlers of Wimpole Street move ponderously even *to-day*; in the summer of 1842 they were more deliberate still" (italics mine, 14). From her position in the future, Woolf criticizes the belief that "civilization is secure" in neighbourhoods with visible wealth. Because Barrett Browning's bedroom bordered Whitechapel, one of the worst slums in Victorian London, Woolf scrutinizes her limited knowledge of London's poor. As Julia Briggs observes, "Woolf wrote into [*Flush*] her own reading of the fissure at the heart of Victorian society, its peculiar dialectic between fear and freedom – its gap between idealism and squalor, upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside, respectable and criminal" (277), and this divide is made even more apparent by Woolf's

retrospective position. Situating her readership between the past and her contemporary present, Woolf deconstructs the apparently eternal tranquility of Barrett Browning's privileged London neighbourhood. However, Woolf's detailed description of Wimpole Street's uniformity and stability contrasts her later descriptions of Whitechapel's squalor. Civility is initially embodied by Wimpole Street's uniformity, but Miss Barrett and Flush later discover that civilization extends beyond the limitations of the back-bedroom school, and that there are valuable lessons to be learned by venturing beyond these boundaries. Thus, despite the wealth of Wimpole Street, the external appearance of this neighbourhood is deceptive, especially because Barrett Browning is subject to tyranny and seclusion just beyond the regularity of the brass door knocker.

Through Barrett Browning's letters, Woolf relays an incident that shifted the poet's perception of Wimpole Street, describing an afternoon in which Miss Barrett and her sister "went in a cab to Vere Street" and lost Flush. "Miss Barrett had forgotten the chain," she writes, "therefore, Flush was stolen. Such, in the year 1846, was the law of Wimpole Street" (51). When Flush is kidnapped and taken to the slums of Whitechapel, the developing relationship between woman writer and dog culminates as Miss Barrett pleads for Flush's return: Miss Barrett's "father and her brother were in league against her….But worst of all… Mr Browning himself threw all his weight, all his eloquence…on the side of Wimpole Street and against Flush" (60). By relaying Barrett Browning's laborious attempts to recover her dog from Whitechapel's henchmen, Woolf demonstrates that fathers, brothers, and romantic partners have transformed into formidable enemies instead of allies. Instead of assisting Barrett Browning in the recovery of Flush, the men of Wimpole Street try to prevent the reunion of two marginalized and effectively powerless subjects. Woolf emphasizes the opposing forces of the Victorian household and champions Miss Barrett's choice to disregard their opinions in favour of saving Flush. The latter half of the "Whitechapel" chapter unfolds

with a melodramatic undertone as Miss Barrett stares at "Mr Browning's letter lying open on the table" but resolutely continues to dress herself, for "if she went to Whitechapel she was siding… against…fathers, brothers and domineerers in general….A dog howled in the mews. It was tied up, helpless in the power of cruel men. It seemed to her to cry as it howled 'Think of Flush'" (62). When Miss Barrett hears the howl of the dog, she is not only reminded of Flush's powerless position, but she also associates the sound with the "cruel men" who placed Flush in a perilous situation, both in Whitechapel and on Wimpole Street.

Barrett Browning exhibits profound strength in the face of patriarchal oppression and ventures to Whitechapel to rescue Flush with Wilson by her side. To emphasize the challenges of this departure, Woolf implies that "it was almost as difficult for her to go to Flush as for Flush to come to her…Wimpole Street was determined to make a stand against Whitechapel" (60). Despite the opposition between these two social worlds, Woolf insinuates that Barrett Browning's life on Wimpole Street was contingent upon the impoverished slums surrounding her, and questions interpretations of Barrett Browning's biography that focus only on the aristocratic neighbourhood of her heritage. For Miss Barrett's system of values to be challenged, she must venture into "a world that [she] had never seen, had never guessed at…a world where vice and poverty breed vice and poverty" (63), and she must accomplish this mission without the aid of the patriarchal figures at Wimpole Street. The men in Miss Barrett's life employ masculine rationale to negotiate with the kidnappers, and this strategy is destined to fail because it ignores both Flush and Miss Barrett's emotional responses. As Miss Barrett says, "I can't run any risk and bargain and haggle" (58) or else Flush will be returned in "a brown paper parcel" containing "the head and paws of the dog" (54). Because Miss Barrett is coerced into choosing between her men and her canine companion, Squier posits that "the Whitechapel episode is a temptation scene…Barrett is…being asked, symbolically, to choose between two systems of morality – one masculine and impersonal,

the other feminine and personal" (128). Instead of impatiently bargaining with her male counterparts and continuing to risk Flush's life, Miss Barrett realizes that she must retrieve Flush herself, an act that Woolf celebrates as a monumental rebellion.

Furthermore, Woolf implies that Barrett Browning's decision to rescue Flush served as a source of artistic inspiration later in her life; she explains that Miss Barrett "still saw 'the faces of those men.' They were to come before her again years later when she sat writing on a sunny balcony in Italy. They were to inspire the most vivid passages in *Aurora Leigh*" (64). Just as Aurora transcends class boundaries to cultivate a sisterly relationship with Marian Erle, Barrett Browning's experiences in Whitechapel produce what Squier describes as "a sense of sisterhood with the slum women, a sisterhood that women of the upper and middle classes attained less frequently later in the century" (132). Moving beyond the back-bedroom school is made possible through Miss Barrett and Flush's relocation to the streets of London's poorest neighbourhood, a geographical displacement that allows both woman and dog to re-evaluate the patriarchal system that defines their existence. Woolf suggests that becoming a successful female artist means a renouncement of Wimpole Street's homogenous morality and an enthusiastic embrace of spontaneity and inclusivity in the broader world. Alongside Miss Barrett on this mission to renunciate Wimpole Street's values is Wilson, Miss Barrett's loyal servant, and her accompaniment on this journey to Whitechapel represents Miss Barrett's realization of sisterhood with all women. However, Wilson's presence in the narrative is not without its problems: her quiet complicity with the forces at Wimpole Street, and her horror upon arrival at Whitechapel indicate Woolf's determination to not only criticize class, gender, and species relations in both Victorian and modern worlds, but also to challenge the power relations of life writing itself.

While Woolf initially attempts to recover Barrett Browning from a fate of obscurity, she also uncovers the forgotten life of Barrett Browning's servant, Lily Wilson, and draws

upon her own relationships with the servants in her life. Woolf was surrounded by serving staff for the majority of her life, and as Alison Light posits, this influence is prominent in her writing: "whenever Virginia felt drawn to idealize the Victorian past…she stepped back from the romance….When she wrote about Victorian servants it was harder to give up the pleasure of nostalgia….Lily [Wilson's] life," Light argues, "is wrapped up in the afterglow of memory" (71). Whereas Woolf separates herself from the romantic mythologization of the Brownings' courtship, her interpretation of Wilson's life is imbued with an unusual mixture of romanticism and criticism stemming from her position as a privileged woman with servants. Woolf both celebrates Wilson's crucial role in Barrett Browning's history and criticizes Wilson's marginalized position. Wilson mostly exists in the periphery of Woolf's narrative, occasionally interjecting remarks and doling out punishments in response to Flush's disobedience. However, Woolf devotes a lengthy endnote to the known information about Wilson's life. She writes that "the life of Lily Wilson is extremely obscure and thus cries aloud for the services of a biographer. No human figure in the Browning letters…more excites our curiousity and baffles it" (109-110). As Anna Snaith observes, this decision to contain Wilson's life in a footnote is purposeful: "Wilson is the unsaid of *Flush,* below the text in a footnote, marginalized and boxed off," and "the footnote, like the servants' quarters, denotes relegation, the excess of the text, but also the inevitability of the unsaid" ("Of Fanciers" 620). Just as Lily Wilson is relegated to the endnotes of *Flush,* Barrett Browning herself is banished to the catacombs of Woolf's imagined literary mansion to ruminate on her cultural neglect. However, while Miss Barrett can escape from the tyranny of Wimpole Street, Lily Wilson must continue to submit to her mistress and is never fully free from marginalization. Despite Woolf's attempt in *Flush* to acknowledge Wilson's history, she concludes her endnote with Barrett Browning's words as "an epitaph," writing that "a more honest, true and affectionate heart than Wilson's cannot be found" (113). Thus, Wilson

remains subordinate to her mistress, and Woolf, caught up in the "afterglow" of memory as she recalls the lives of her former servants, overshadows Wilson's temporary autonomy. As the author, Woolf possesses the power to extract forgotten lives from the servants' quarters, but she recognizes that this power is limited; no matter how thorough her depictions, the inevitability of life writing is that someone's story is always left in the margins.

Whether Woolf is writing the forgotten history of a literary woman, assuming the perspective of an overlooked servant, or creating a voice for a four-legged companion, her feminist recovery project occupies a multiplicity of spheres, both intellectual and social, and physical and spiritual. Woolf's mission, no matter what perspective she inhabits, is to experiment with the genre-blurring potential of modernity, and moreover, to allow overlooked female figures to attain the recognition and fair representation that they deserve. As Claire Battershill writes, "approaching Barrett Browning…from the intimate gaze of her pet…highlights the ridiculousness of overly and even disrespectfully earnest portrayals of the personal lives of literary figures" (101). Indeed, Woolf's intention in *Flush* is to alleviate her fears of misrepresentation while working to amend the erroneous representations of her literary foremothers. Writing Barrett Browning's biography through the eyes of her dog may seem like a disrespectful, or even mocking approach to history, but Woolf's autobiografictional mode gracefully accomplishes what the 1931 draft could not: an honest, vivid depiction of female life, as seen through the intimate perspective of a perceptive canine and his omniscient narrative counterpart. By situating her own voice alongside the voice of a Victorian woman and her dog, Woolf implies that there is room in the history books for all women. Not only does Woolf want women to be unafraid of life writing and biography, but she also wants them to impart a sense of selfhood into what they write. By unearthing the history of her literary foremothers, Woolf illuminates the depths of her own experience, and in turn, creates a subversive modernist work that recognizes both Barrett Browning's

neglected history and the life of the woman that unearthed her story. In *A Room of One's Own,* Woolf is overwhelmed by all of the "infinitely obscure lives [that] remain to be recorded" and feels the "pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life" (88). *Flush: A Biography* is Woolf's response to this ceaseless accumulation of unknown histories.

CONCLUSION

In her 1924 essay "Character in Fiction," Woolf famously articulates the curious shift between her Victorian past and her present modernity, asserting that "on or about December 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered…The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless" (421-22). The precision of "December 1910" is negated by her tentative "on or about," and this contradiction continues into the next paragraph, in which she humorously writes, "since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910" (422). Despite her claims that this date is arbitrary, there is a sense that identifying a moment of emerging modernity matters immensely to Woolf. She was, as many members of the Bloomsbury group were, forming a radical, defiant identity that rebelled against her Victorian forerunners, and by creating divisions between the Victorian and the modern, she could more easily conceptualize the instability of the present. However, Woolf gradually acknowledges that this change did not rapidly occur, and her willingness to accept and explore the continuity between the Victorian and the modern is part of what makes *Flush* and "Aurora Leigh" so intriguing. While many of her Bloomsbury contemporaries distanced themselves from their Victorian predecessors, Woolf diligently worked to recover them.

Although Woolf boldly pinpoints December 1910 as the beginning of modernity, she also criticizes the impulse to create arbitrary constructions between the past and the present. As *Flush* and "Aurora Leigh" prove, recovering Barrett Browning's neglected history not only forces Woolf to confront her Victorian background, but also acknowledge that a perfect moment of modernity, untethered to the past, simply does not exist. In other words, Woolf did not reject the Victorians, she rewrote them. Re-writing her relationship with her father, her Victorian heritage, and her female predecessors is simultaneously disruptive, revisionary, and preservative, and it is through Barrett Browning's lived experiences that she identifies

how not only "human character changed" (421), but also how she too transformed. Gillian Beer articulates this connection, writing that "the Victorians are not simply represented (or re-presented) in her novels…the Victorians are also *in* Virginia Woolf. They are internalized, inseparable, as well as held at arm's length. They are mimicked with an art of parody… indebted to its material" (original emphasis, 93). When Woolf writes Barrett Browning's history, she imbues the narrative with shades of her inner Victorian. This blending of a Victorian and modern Woolf surfaces in "Aurora Leigh" as she neatly summarizes both Barrett Browning's life and her own life: "her mother died when she was a child," she writes, "she read profusely and privately; her favourite brother was drowned; her health broke down; she had been immured by the tyranny of her father in almost conventual seclusion" (206). As Beer indicates, Woolf tries to break away from this "undertow of self-reference" and "suppressed congruity" (94), but her efforts often fall short. Despite her endeavor to recover Barrett Browning's biography with the wary, critical eye of modernity, Woolf is swept away in these undercurrents, ultimately acknowledging the enigma of a shared Victorian past.

As Woolf read *Aurora Leigh* in her library, or the Browning love letters in her garden, she recognized that Barrett Browning's life and works possess a compelling magic that far outlives her dying literary reputation. Instead of letting Barrett Browning stay in the servants' quarters, Woolf created an afterlife for the poet, extending her cultural memory by commemorating her forgotten history. As Julia Novak observes, female biographies "provide examples of how to live a good life" by offering "patterns of behavior and models of female achievement (or failure)" (84), and Woolf's efforts to canonize Barrett Browning's history in *Flush* and "Aurora Leigh" are no exception. While Barrett Browning's narrative provides this aspirational model of female achievement, Woolf acknowledges that her life had severe restrictions, and these misogynistic limitations offer a warning signal to women. Thus, the afterlife that Woolf creates for Barrett Browning not only registers a model of female

achievement, but it also provides an example of how contemporary women should respond to the stories of their predecessors. As Novak observes, these reinvented afterlives revitalize the lives of forgotten historical women in an inherently modernist way: while biographers "adhere to the principles of truthfulness, verifiability, and objectivity, no such restrictions apply to novelists…they draw on the "facts" of a life in their accounts of the biographee, sometimes…confirming, sometimes contesting the image preserved of a subject in cultural memory" (85). This progression from careful biographical preservation in "Aurora Leigh" and the 1931 draft of *Flush,* to a radically autobiografictional response to Barrett Browning's life in the published *Flush* embodies the aims of Woolf's recovery project. At first, she experiments with the conventional models of her Victorian predecessors, and when she realizes that Barrett Browning's life does not comfortably fit within these parameters, she widens her scope to accommodate the fictional, biographical, and autobiographical. This method, although unconventional, does not necessarily render her recovery ineffective; on the contrary, Woolf's experimentation with modernist methods of biographical preservation encourages women to respond not only to the novels they read, but also, to the women who wrote them. Thus, Woolf's quasi-fictional approach paved the way for future authors in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

Following in the footsteps of *Flush*'s autobiografictional mode*,* numerous semi-fictionalized responses to Barrett Browning's life were published, including Helen Elmira Waite's *How Do I Love Thee: The Story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1953)*,* Constance Buel Burnett's *The Silver Answer: A Romantic Biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1955)*,* Margaret Forster's *Lady's Maid* (1990)*,* and Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008).[6] All of these novels explore Barrett Browning's complex history by infusing biography with fictional elements. Although these works participate in a reimagining of Barrett Browning's

[6] For a detailed analysis of these semi-fictional works, see Julia Novak's "The Notable Woman in Fiction: The Afterlives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

troubled history, Margaret Forster's and Laura Fish's approaches are particularly unique, as they both respond to Woolf's incomplete recovery of the obscure, marginalized lives surrounding Barrett Browning. While Forster offers a decentralized perspective on Barrett Browning's life by fictionalizing Lily Wilson's unknown history, Fish's postcolonial narrative combines Barrett Browning's perspective with a fieldworker and domestic slave working at the Barretts' Cinnamon Hill estate in Jamaica. As Simon Avery posits, Woolf's work prompts us to rephrase Barrett Browning's age-old question: "How shall we re-read thee? Let me count the ways" (Avery 405), and these fictionalized accounts of her experiences participate in the radical rereading of her life and works that Woolf began.

Along with these fictionalized accounts of Barrett Browning's life, the onset of second wave feminism in the 1970s and '80s spurred another brief revival as Ellen Moers, Cora Kaplan, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, Sandra Gilbert and Rachel Blau DuPlessis[7] incited a feminist rereading of *Aurora Leigh.* Leading up to this revitalization, Woolf, as Marjorie Stone describes, "remained a voice crying in the critical wilderness" (22), and her praise of Barrett Browning heralded this feminist renaissance. Although this scholarship remains foundational, critical focus has recently shifted away from feminist interpretations of Barrett Browning's work. Instead, the new millennium has ushered in discourses on religion, postcolonialism, nationalism, and geography in her oeuvre, especially as these areas relate to the class dynamics of Victorian society. While some scholars have questioned Barrett Browning's status in the twentieth century with *Aurora Leigh* at the forefront of their analysis[8], research on Barrett Browning's historical neglect is still in its infancy. As Karen

[7] See Moers, *Literary Women* (1976); Kaplan, *Introduction to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (1978); Gelpi, "'Aurora Leigh: The Vocation of the Woman Poet'" (1981); Gilbert, "'From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento'" (1984); and DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985).

[8] Notable examples include Tricia Lootens, who views EBB as a neglected Victorian writer in *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (1996); Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott in *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (2003); Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor, who assess EBB's critical reception in "'Confirm My Voice'": 'My sisters,' Poetic Audiences, and the Published Voices of EBB" (2006); and Julia Novak, who discusses EBB's afterlives in "The Notable Woman in Fiction: The Afterlives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning"

Manarin explains, Barrett Browning's place in twenty-first century scholarship is not secure, and her position as an overlooked author in the North American curriculum reflects this insecurity: "it is dangerous to oversimplify the multiple, often contradictory forces of canon formation to assume that individual scholars can change the canon at will," she writes, "but it is also dangerous to assume that our choices in the classroom and in our scholarship are innocent" (130). Thus, it is still the case that only excerpts of *Aurora Leigh* and select poems from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* find their way into contemporary literary anthologies, and this unwillingness to recognize the breadth of Barrett Browning's oeuvre perpetuates her historical erasure. Although it is no longer true that "nobody reads [Barrett Browning], nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place" (Woolf 202), more work must be done to fully recover Barrett Browning's place in literary history.

Research in the twenty-first century must also acknowledge Woolf's pivotal role in recovering multiple female Victorian authors. Although Woolf wrote semi-biographical works on the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Gaskell, relatively little work has been done to investigate the scope and nature of Woolf's relationship with her female Victorian predecessors. Scholarship on Victorian-modern continuity more generally must also further recognize Woolf's ground-breaking attempts to recover female Victorian authors, and her intrinsic connection to Barrett Browning provides a fundamental basis for the pursuit of this research.

In *Flush,* Woolf describes Barrett Browning as "England's foremost poetess, the brilliant, the doomed, the adored Elizabeth Barrett" (13), and this peculiar sequence of adjectives reveals much about Woolf's relationship with her Victorian predecessors. While Woolf's recovery work celebrates Barrett Browning's brilliance, it also suggests that without

(2016). For more examples, see Beverly Taylor's "Guide to the Year's Work: Elizabeth Barrett Browning" *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 57, no. 3, Fall 2019, pp. 372-379.

Woolf's timely intervention, Barrett Browning was doomed to slowly expire in the back bedroom, remembered as little more than Robert Browning's invalid wife. However, by interrogating Barrett Browning's twentieth-century obscurity, Woolf not only acknowledges that Barrett Browning was once adored by her Victorian contemporaries, but she also suggests that we might transform our ambivalence into adoration, retrospection, and appreciation. Woolf realizes that she too could be viewed by posterity as brilliant, doomed, or adored, and her response to Barrett Browning's work is an attempt to mitigate this multiplicity of outcomes. Woolf does not want to "settle into a figure" (4:85), but she also does not want to be forgotten altogether or seen as a relic of an outdated past, just as Barrett Browning was. Thus, while reading *Aurora Leigh,* "we laugh, we protest, we complain," she writes, "but, nevertheless, we read to the end enthralled" (213). Without the intervention of feminist writers like herself, Barrett Browning's works might well have been left to collect dust on library shelves.

Although Woolf elucidates Barrett Browning's storied past in *Flush* and "Aurora Leigh," her recovery project remains partially incomplete. Woolf is limited by her troubled Victorian past, and while her reclamation of the poet spurred a brief feminist renaissance, her meticulous work validates the need for a much larger recovery project. Woolf assists Barrett Browning in emerging afresh from the servants' quarters, but without the help of feminist scholars in the twenty-first century, she is destined to descend once again into the basement of the literary mansion.

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